One Friend to Another

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Nicole Aldrich might have a lot going for her as she starts junior high, but what she has isn't exactly what she wants. After years as the class brain, Nicole is ready to make a clean break. She knows she's not about to become gorgeous and chic at the new school, but she can at least try to be friends with someone who is, like Rhonda Winkler.

Before long, everything seems to work for Nicole—Rhonda becomes her friend, she has her first boyfriend, and seventh grade is going perfectly. But then Nicole's friendship is betrayed. And when she discovers who betrayed her, Nicole must face the truth about herself and about real friendship.

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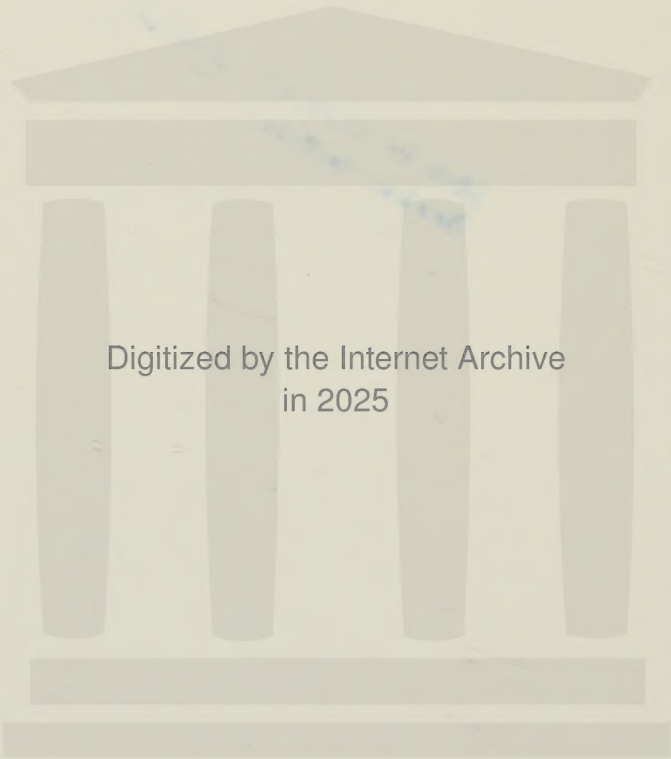
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Elizabeth Feuer

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For my mother and father

One Friend to Another

1

Does it ever seem to you, like it does to me, that the things you have are exactly the things you don't want? And vice versa, of course. So if you're athletic, you want to be glamorous, and if you're smart, you want to be popular. I used to feel that way all the time—that it wasn't very terrific being me. I'm too tall, my hair is too frizzy, and my only claim to fame is getting the best marks in school. Who wants to be like that? Last year, though, some things happened to change my mind, and now I wouldn't be surprised to find out that there was a kid somewhere whose whole ambition in life was to be Nicole Aldrich. Because everyone wants to be different, at least some of the time—even the people who are perfect.

But when I began seventh grade at Deertrail Junior High, I didn't understand all that. All I knew then was that *I* wanted to be different. I'd had more than enough of being the class genius. In my elementary school, I was the one the teacher always saved to answer what the capital of Sierra Leone was, or to

demonstrate least common denominators on the board. I won the science fair and the spelling bee, and when the head of the PTA visited, I made the class presentation. Kids hold that stuff against you. They think you're trying to show off. Everyone called me the Amazing Brain—the Brain, for short—and it couldn't have been worse if I had the bubonic plague. My social life was a zero. None of the good kids asked me to their birthdays or sat with me at lunch. And if I complained about it at home, my mother would say, "But, Nicole, you do get asked to parties. Why, only last week Doreen Nugent invited you, and you made me call and say you were sick." Doreen Nugent was the only kid in the class worse off than me. At her parties, Pin the Tail on the Donkey was the high point.

That's why when I started seventh grade I made a resolve that my life would change. No more class genius for me. At Deertrail, I was going to blend, and make friends with some popular girls, for once. I was starting fresh, and on account of the crazy zoning here in Pipertown, New Jersey, most of the kids in my old school were going to Lloyd Junior High. No one would know how I used to be—I wouldn't be saddled with a reputation. All I had to do was remember not to go waving my hand in class the first time I knew an answer. Easy.

But the first morning I got dressed to go to Deertrail, I was still a nervous wreck. It was my big opportunity, and I knew if I blew it, I'd never survive three more years as the Amazing Brain. I sat there at the breakfast

table, chomping my muffin without even tasting it.

"Nicki, don't wolf your food," my mother said. "I don't know why you're so edgy. You always do fine in school." Sure, I thought, but if they gave out grades for popularity, my average would be Q minus. I ate my last bite of muffin and went outside to wait for the bus.

Pipertown is a fairly ordinary place, I guess—pretty houses and lawns, friendly dogs, Girl Scout troops. But when the school bus turned the corner and the doors opened whoosh! in front of me, I felt like I'd stepped back in time and was about to be swallowed alive by a fire-breathing dragon. All those faces I didn't know! I almost wished I was going back to my old school. Even though it had been rotten, I at least knew what to expect.

I stumbled to an empty seat by the window and glued my nose to the glass as the bus swung away. The kids around me talked and laughed. I must have been the only person with no friends at all. The bus rolled past the streets of houses and stopped finally in front of a squatty tan brick building with orange doors. That was it. I'd never noticed before how much it looked like a prison.

Everybody piled out and squeezed through the school doors into a noisy, dark lobby. It was so crowded that I could have picked up my feet and not fallen down. I realized I didn't know where I was going. The assignment card they had sent me said, *Mr. Nathan, Homeroom 135*, but where was that? Then I spotted

a long table, off to one side of the room, with a sign over it, SEVENTH GRADE ORIENTATION. So I swam over.

"Hello, who are you?" asked the lady behind the table. She was young and very pretty, with blond hair wisping down her back. Her name tag read, *Miss Tobie, English Dept.*

"I'm Nicole Aldrich," I said, trying to sound grown-up but coming out mostly squeaky over all the racket.

"All right, let's see . . ." And she scanned down a strip of computer paper. "Oh yes, here you are. You're in Mr. Nathan's class, room 135. That's down the corridor to the left . . ." But by then a bunch more kids were shoving in and I had to move along.

If everyone is as nice as her . . . I thought. Of course they won't be. And sure enough, two seconds later, while I was trying to find the numbers of the rooms, some older kids, eighth- and ninth-graders, went whizzing past.

"Look at those seventh-grade babies," I heard one of them say. I wanted to snap back, "I am not a baby," but when I turned and saw the way all of us new kids were bumbling around, I had to admit we did look pretty helpless.

By the time I got to homeroom, it was a quarter past nine, and if it hadn't been a specially long period that day, it would have been ending just when I got there. Everyone else was late, too. Most of the kids were still walking around and talking. Up in front of the room, writing on the board with his back to the class, was a great big guy with black hair. That must

be Mr. Nathan, I thought, and for the first time I considered what it might be like having a man teacher. I'd always had women before. Probably he would be extra strict and yell real loud—he looked like a gigantic bear. When he turned around, though, he had a nice face, young and kind of cute.

"If you'll please take your seats," he said, glancing around. "Just take the nearest one—we'll assign permanent places later." There was a lot of banging and shuffling. "Okay, first things first—let's call the roll. From the top—Aldrich, Nicole." I stood up, and he smiled. Then I settled back in my seat to watch. It was weird looking at all the strange faces. Right now they blurred together—a roomful of kids I didn't know. In a couple of weeks or a month, they would all be sorted out. The artistic ones, and the sports stars, and—the brains. Like me. Unless I could make friends with the right person. Someone beautiful and stylish, who knew what to do and say . . .

And then I saw her. Mr. Nathan had almost reached the end of his list. "Trager, Jeffrey," he called out. "And last but not least—Winkler, Rhonda." She stood up.

In every class, there's got to be one girl who's the best-looking and most fashionable, the one that everybody wants for a friend. But if you took the most beautiful and stylish girl from every classroom in the whole United States of America, and put all of *them* together in one class, the girl *they* would want to be friends with would be Rhonda Winkler.

She was standing near the front of the room, very slender and petite, with her dark brown hair hanging straight down her back. She had on tight black jeans and a hot-pink sweat shirt, with the word KAZAM! across the front of it, in lime green. The collar was sort of raggedy-torn instead of smooth, and she wore a gold necklace above it. Her fingernails were polished pink.

She sat down gracefully, with a tiny smile at Mr. Nathan, who cleared his throat and began to talk about the school and its rules, and how to conduct yourself in the halls. I didn't listen much. I stared at my assignment card. I had math next, on the second floor, and social studies after that, with Mr. Nathan again, and for English I had someone called Miss Seifert, not the pretty lady from the lobby. All these new places to find, and new teachers to get to know, and all I could do was think about Rhonda Winkler and wonder how I could get to meet her.

After another fifteen minutes or so, the bell rang and we trooped out into the halls. In spite of what Mr. Nathan had said about how you were supposed to behave, a lot of kids shouted and pushed. I squinted ahead, trying to make out the room numbers. Somebody jostled me and hurried by. It was Rhonda, in her hot-pink sweat shirt, disappearing into the crowd. She hadn't seen me, and I hadn't tried to say hello. Good work, Nicole, I thought. Exactly forty-seven minutes in the new school and already you missed the boat.

But as it turned out, I saw Rhonda Winkler again sooner than I anticipated. We were both in the honors program, and we had English, social studies, and even lunch together. Well—not exactly together. In the cafeteria, I sat at a table by myself, and Rhonda sat across the room, laughing and talking with a bunch of kids. What did you expect? I thought. Of course she has friends. She wouldn't be just hanging around waiting for you.

Late that afternoon, riding the bus home, I argued it back and forth to myself. First—she doesn't need you. She's got a million friends already. Then—so what if she has other friends? Couldn't she like someone new? The bus let me off and I went in the house and got a snack, and when my mother, who teaches at Pipertown High, got home a half hour later, I was still sitting in the kitchen.

"Well, how was your first day at school, worrywart?" she asked. "I'll bet it went fine."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know? How can you not know?" She shook her head. "So tell me a little about it. What will you be doing in class? What are your new teachers like?"

"They're like . . . teachers. There's Mr. Nathan for social studies, and Miss Seifert for English. And there's kids. You know. It's okay."

She turned to look at me. "That's all you have to say? It's okay? This morning you were in a panic, and now you don't want to talk about it."

"Yeah." I managed a smile. "Well, they gave us a lot of homework already. I think I'll go upstairs and get started on it."

She shrugged. "All right, have it your way. I'll see you later."

So I tromped up the stairs. But when I got to my room, I didn't open my homework. I put my books on the desk and walked to the mirror and stared at myself. And I could see why Rhonda hadn't noticed me. My being the class brain didn't only show on my report card. It was written all over me.

I was too tall. My hands and feet were long and skinny, and they gangled out in funny directions. My hair was a frizzy blob—like Lucy in *Peanuts*. And my clothes. I couldn't even bear to think about my clothes. I shut my eyes and pictured Rhonda, with her jewelry, and her hot-pink socks and black suede pumps. There was no way, absolutely no way, that Rhonda Winkler would become friends with a klutz like me. How could I have been so stupid to think of starting over at Deertrail? Nothing was going to be different. Because the problem wasn't with the school.

2

I think I spent most of my time over the next few weeks trying to figure out how to become friends with Rhonda. It seemed impossible. During classes she mostly kept to herself—sitting quietly and watching the teacher, or taking notes in her beautiful neat handwriting. She didn't look around or talk. Once in a while I'd smile at her, and she'd smile back in that same pretty, polite way she had used for Mr. Nathan the first day. She didn't mean anything special by it. If only I didn't look so dumpy, I'd think. Maybe then I'd have a chance. Of course buying a new pair of Levi's wouldn't do the trick. I needed a complete makeover, and I couldn't see talking my mom into that. So I went along, day to day, not doing anything.

At lunchtime I tried to sit at a table near her. She was always surrounded by a crowd of girls, kids I guess she had known since elementary school. I didn't recognize them from our classes. They laughed and whispered together, and most of them had nice clothes and hairdos and looked very grown-up, although nat-

urally they weren't as pretty as Rhonda. In fact, one of them, this little short kid with curly black hair, was maybe not even as pretty as me. She sat next to Rhonda every day. Sometimes I wished we could trade places. But then I figured maybe it just proved Rhonda felt sorry for her, and I didn't want anyone's pity.

By the beginning of October I hadn't gotten any friendlier with Rhonda than I was on the first day of school, and I had almost given up hope. Then along came the most surprising piece of good luck, thanks to Mr. Nathan.

"Class," he announced one day, "we're going to start a unit now that deals with one of the most important aspects of social science—something that touches each one of us in our day-to-day lives . . . economics."

Everyone groaned. I opened my notebook and got out a pen. You could tell just from the way he said it, it was going to be a big part of the term grade.

"There are several sections to the unit," he went on, "covering different types of economic systems, although we'll be concentrating mostly on our own. It'll be a lot of work, with special projects to hand in. So I thought it would be more fun to do it in teams."

I heard rustles and murmurs all around the room. Oh, it's great for them, I thought. They have friends. But who am I going to buddy with? Then I felt a nudge at my elbow.

"It's for you," said the girl next to me, shoving a

note in my hand. *Wait for me after class,* it read. And it was signed *Rhonda.*

At first I wondered if I had done something wrong, like picking up her loose-leaf by mistake. But then she smiled at me! Was it possible she wanted to be my buddy? For the rest of the period I didn't take another note. I could hardly believe it—the thing I wanted most was dropping into my lap!

Right after the bell rang, she came over, looking great as usual, all in powder blue—top, pants, and shoes. Her hair was fastened back on each side with colored barrettes, and she had tiny gold buttons in her ears and a gold heart-shaped ring on her finger.

"Hi," she said, with a little shrug. "You got my note?"

"Oh. Yes. I wasn't sure why you wanted to talk to me, though."

"You weren't?"

I shook my head.

"I thought it was obvious," said Rhonda. "It's about the project. That economics stuff that Mr. Nathan assigned us. I thought we might work together."

So that *was* it. I hadn't dared to believe it before. "*You* . . . want to work with *me*?"

"Sure. Why not? The kids always talk about how smart you are."

"They do?"

"Of course. Some of my friends have classes with kids from your old school, and they said you won the

science prize and the spelling bee, and that you were school valedictorian."

I could have screamed. Maybe five kids from my elementary school were at Deertrail. Why did they have to go shooting off their big mouths?

"Yeah," Rhonda went on. "They say you're practically a genius. Isn't that right?"

"I wouldn't say that. I guess it's true about the prizes."

"You guess? Oh, I get it. You're the modest type. You don't want people to think you're bragging."

We walked together into the hall. A million times I'd imagined my first conversation with Rhonda, and it never went like this. How did we end up talking about my schoolwork? We strolled along for a minute, and then Rhonda said, "So, what about this project for Mr. Nathan's class? You want to do it together?"

"Why, sure. I'd like that," I mumbled.

"You don't sound very positive."

"No, I would. I'd like it a lot."

She nodded slowly. "Good. I'm glad. Because for a minute I thought you might only want to work with another valedictorian."

"Oh no! I never even thought that." I added, a little softer, "It was only that I couldn't believe that *you* wanted to buddy with *me*."

We walked side by side down the hall to our next class and planned what we would do. The first assignment was to make booklets on advertising, with clippings from magazines showing all the different

techniques. Rhonda said she had everything we'd need.

"My mother has a whole closetful of old copies of *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*. We'll use those. I bet we'll be able to put this project together in a snap." Before I knew it, I'd arranged to go to her house the next day after school.

Rhonda lived in the prettiest neighborhood in Pipertown, and her house was the nicest on the block. Birch trees were planted in front, and a walk of white pebbles curved up to the door. On the inside was more white—the walls, the furniture, the carpets—and everything sparkled with metal and glass. I checked my footprints to be sure I wasn't tracking in any mud.

Rhonda showed me into the kitchen and asked me to sit at the table while she got cookies and milk. She nibbled very delicately, picking out the chocolate chips one by one. My cookie crunched so loud the sound filled the whole room.

"Your house is really gorgeous," I said.

She shrugged. "My mother's an interior decorator."

"How about your father? What does he do?"

"He's a lawyer. He lives in Los Angeles now, so I don't see him. They're divorced."

Trust me to make a dumb remark. But Rhonda only smiled. "Come on, let's go upstairs," she said.

Rhonda's bedroom was even nicer than the rest of the house. It was mostly white too, with a ruffled coverlet and a canopy on the bed. The carpet was pink, and the wallpaper had pink-and-green stripes.

She had one of those vanity tables with lights all around so you can put on makeup. And when she opened her closet I saw racks and racks of clothes, shoes and tops and dresses, with the colors mixing together like a rainbow.

"This is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," I said softly.

"Thanks." Then she pulled over a huge stack of magazines. "Maybe we should get to work. My mother said we could use any of these." She wrinkled her nose. "They're pretty out-of-date."

I opened my notebook to find Mr. Nathan's handout: "Techniques of Persuasion."

"Number one," I read out loud, "the Transfer Technique. The advertiser attempts to link his product with some symbol carrying strong positive emotions, such as the American flag."

"What?" said Rhonda.

"Oh. That means he'll put like red, white, and blue on the package, to make you think of America and the flag, and that kind of thing. So you'll like his product better. You know, like they do on cornflakes boxes."

"There aren't any cornflake ads in *Vogue*."

"No. I mean, I know that. I was just giving an example." I stuck my nose in a magazine.

We kept reading. It was hard to find examples of the Transfer Technique.

"How about this?" asked Rhonda, holding up a lipstick ad.

"That's only red and white. And pink. That doesn't count."

"Or this?"

I shook my head. "Save it, though. It's a good example of a testimonial." It was one of those mink ads, with a movie star—it might have been Liza Minnelli—wrapped up in a fur coat.

"It's also a good example of a dream," said Rhonda, flopping backward and kissing the page.

That coat would have looked better on her than on Liza Minnelli. "I'll keep looking for the Transfer Technique," I said.

We worked on the assignment most of the afternoon. But by four o'clock, we'd found illustrations for only three of the different techniques.

"This dumb assignment's taking forever." Rhonda yawned. "Besides, you're not supposed to use magazines to learn from. That's what encyclopedias are for."

"Well, at least we can work on it together. That makes it more fun."

"I guess." She rubbed her eyes and stretched. "We'll have to finish another time. You want to come back Saturday?"

"This Saturday?"

"Yeah. I want to get this over with, don't you?"

"Oh. Sure. Saturday sounds like a good idea."

Rhonda started to giggle. "Come on, Nicole. I know even you think it's a crummy way to spend the weekend. But we don't have to do it all day. We'll just

work in the morning. And afterward, we'll do something fun. My mom usually goes to the health club at ten-thirty, but she's done by lunch, so maybe we can get her to take us to the mall."

"Honest? Could we do that?"

"Why not? If you want to."

"I'd love to."

"Okay." Rhonda nodded her head. Then she snapped her fingers. "Oh, Nicole, I almost forgot, my friend Randy is coming in the morning on Saturday. I already invited her. Do you mind?"

"You want me to come another time?"

"No, you don't have to. But I just wanted to warn you. Randy can be sort of loud sometimes. Or immature. I don't know."

"I want to meet your friends, Rhonda."

"Okay." She shrugged. "I just wanted to make sure you wouldn't let Randy bug you. Because she is a good kid when you get to know her."

"I'm sure I'll like her."

After that I called my mom to come get me. She pulled up in the driveway and honked the horn, and I scrambled into the car. "So, how was your study session?" she asked, giving me a kiss. "Did you get lots accomplished?"

"Oh yes," I said. "Lots." And with a grin I settled back in my seat.

3

On Saturday morning my mother drove me to Rhonda's house at nine o'clock. I had been up since six, and pestering her to take me since eight, but she said nine was the earliest civilized time to pay a visit.

"I want to spend a few minutes there myself," she said. "You know I always like to meet your friends' mothers."

Of course, even though I hadn't met her yet, I was sure just from knowing Rhonda that Mrs. Winkler would be terrific. And when she opened the door that day, she was just like I'd imagined—small and delicate and stylish, even though she was only wearing a sweat suit.

"It's nice to meet you, Nicole," she said. "Rhonda's told me so much about you." She looked at my mother. "I understand your daughter is an outstanding student, Mrs. Aldrich."

"Nicki? Oh, she'll do," said my mother, reaching over to fluff my hair.

"Of course, Rhonda's very bright, too," Mrs. Wink-

ler went on. "I was extremely proud of her school performance last year."

Then she showed us to the kitchen, and got a glass of cold orange juice for me and coffee for her and my mom. She offered us cookies and fruit, too, but I said no, thanks.

"I'm so glad that Rhonda's making some new friends from her class," Mrs. Winkler said, settling herself across from me at the table. "I think this honors program is an excellent idea."

"Yes, Nicole seems happy so far."

"Oh, of course. Bright children need a challenge. And it's better socially, too. More satisfying for them to have friends at their own level."

My mother sipped her coffee. "Well, Nicole certainly seems delighted to have made friends with your daughter, Mrs. . . ."

"Barbara. Please."

"Barbara. And I'm Cynthia, by the way."

They seemed to be getting along great. I decided to take a cookie, after all.

"Well, Cynthia," Mrs. Winkler went on, "to tell you the truth, I'm especially happy to have Rhonda enrolled in this program. Of course she did very well academically last year. But I wasn't too satisfied with her experience."

"No? Why not?"

"Well . . ." She lowered her voice. "It was her teacher, mainly. Miss Karel. She seemed to want to stand in Rhonda's way."

"How peculiar."

"It was nothing obvious, you understand. But sometimes I think teachers don't feel quite comfortable with bright children. Don't like them to be *too* bright, if you know what I mean." Mrs. Winkler leaned toward my mom and dropped her voice. "It went on all year, one little thing after another. But when the question of the honors program came up, that's when we had our real quarrel. Rhonda's grades were excellent, and still Miss Karel was very obstructive. In the end I had to go over her head to the principal."

"She didn't want Rhonda to enroll?"

"No. Naturally she had a dozen excuses—said she didn't believe in special classes and tracking, that children have to get along with all different types. Honestly! Rhonda always got along with everyone. She's an all-around girl. Then she tried to convince me that Rhonda would be unhappy with the pressure. Thank heavens the principal saw it my way."

"Yes, you must have been quite upset."

I had sort of sunk back in my chair during this conversation, trying to be invisible so the grown-ups would forget I was there. All this stuff about Rhonda's old teacher seemed weird. Rhonda was smart. Why would the teacher want to hold her back? I decided Miss Karel must have been even creepier than my old teacher. Maybe I'd ask Rhonda about it when I got to know her better. I finished the last of my cookie and, hoping to pick up some more good gossip, was about to reach for another when my mom suddenly

remembered me. "Nicki," she said in a nice clear voice, "don't you think it's about time you went upstairs and greeted your friend? She's probably waiting for you."

"I'm going, Mom. I was just finishing my juice, and you always tell me not to gulp." I swallowed the dregs and stood up. "Thank you for the snack, Mrs. Winkler."

"You're welcome, dear. Just go up the stairs and to your left. You'll hear the girls talking. Rhonda's friend Randy is up there already."

Randy. In my excitement it had almost slipped my mind that Rhonda and I wouldn't be alone. "Thank you, Mrs. Winkler," I said. And I climbed the stairs and knocked softly on the door to Rhonda's bedroom.

"Well," a voice said, as I slipped in, "look who's here. If it isn't the Amazing Brain."

"Hi, Nicole," said Rhonda.

Somehow, thinking about it in advance, I'd assumed that Randy would be one of those stylish, grown-up-looking girls that sat with Rhonda at lunch. I was wrong. Randy was that short square kid, the one I figured Rhonda felt sorry for. And up close she looked even worse than she did in the cafeteria. She had curly black hair and a squashed nose, and she was so chunky she reminded me more than anything of a toy truck.

"What's she here for?" she asked as I scouted around for a quiet corner of the room. "Are you two still doing that project?"

"Yes, we're still doing that project," said Rhonda primly.

"And you invited me over this morning so you two could work? Merci buckets, Rhonda."

"Well, I'm sorry. But some of us have to study. Some of us who are past the second-grade level." Rhonda sniffed. "Anyway, that's not the only reason Nicole's here. I also asked her to come to the mall this afternoon with my mother and me."

Suddenly the dirty yellow tennis ball Randy had been tossing up and down hit the wall with a terrific smack. I swallowed a mouthful of air.

"Actually," I mumbled, "I did come to work for the morning. And I think maybe I should start. I'll look through these magazines first." I snatched a copy of *Glamour* off the stack.

During this whole time, Rhonda had been standing by her closet, pulling out clothes and holding them up against her. Now she turned to Randy and modeled for her.

"What do you think of this?" she asked, holding a pink-and-lavender-striped pullover against her lavender jeans. "Do you think the top goes?"

Randy didn't even look up. "Sure, Rhonda," she said. "It looks great."

"But maybe this one's better." She held up a darker purple top.

"It's sensational," said Randy.

Rhonda groaned. "Randy, you didn't even look at it." She turned to me. "Nicole, what do you think?"

"Who, me?" I blinked. "I think they're both nice."

"Oh, that's brilliant," said Randy.

Rhonda glared. "Some help you two are. I might

as well flip a coin." She held out the two shirts a moment longer, and then, with one in each hand, she elbowed open the door and skipped off down the stairs.

"I guess she went to ask her mother," Randy said.

For a minute neither of us spoke. The only noise was Randy's ball thwacking against the pink-and-green wallpaper. It had a definitely nasty sound. But then I thought, What good will it do if Rhonda likes me but her friends all hate my guts? I'd better at least make an effort. So I put down my magazine and smiled.

"It's really nice for me to meet you, finally," I said. "I've been noticing you around school, in the lunchroom and stuff, but I didn't know your name. I like getting to know some of Rhonda's other friends."

"What do you mean, her *other* friends?"

I wriggled. "Well, I know Rhonda and I just met. I guess you two have known each other for a long time."

"Ever since second grade."

"Oh." I nodded. "That's great. That you're still together, I mean. I got split up from most of the kids in my elementary school—they all went to Lloyd."

"Lucky for them."

My eyes stung. I was trying so hard, and all she wanted was to trip me up. The ball went smack, smack, against the wall.

"I guess you figure you'll be Rhonda's best friend now," she said, without looking up. "Since you and her are in all those genius classes together."

"I'm not trying to push anybody else out. If that's what you mean."

"No?"

"Of course not."

Randy turned the ball around in her hand, shrugged, and gave it a lazy toss. "Well, it figures," she said. "It's just what me and some of the other girls expected, anyway—Rhonda wanting to hang around with someone like you. Ever since she started this honors program she's been stuck-up."

"Rhonda?"

"Yeah. Although I suppose you wouldn't know. All she does is yak yak yak all the time, about her dumb classes, and her teachers, and all the work she has. It's really boring. Some of the kids say they wouldn't even miss her if she didn't want to stay friends. They say the genius class could have her, and then the two of you could enjoy yourselves, discussing all that junk and showing off. Although personally I think Rhonda still could do better than you."

Just then the door bounced open. "My mother thinks the stripes are better," said Rhonda, a little out of breath from running up the stairs. "I guess I'll change."

"About time." Randy grunted. "Do you think then maybe we could do something interesting for a while? Listen to some new records or something?"

"Put on some music if you want to. I don't care. Go look in the cabinet and pick something."

Randy knelt down by the stereo and thumbed through the albums.

"Rhonda knows a million dances," she said to me. "And she sings, too. She's going to be a famous performer when she grows up." She wrinkled her nose. "I'll bet you can't sing for beans," she added.

"Nicole!" My mother called me from downstairs. "Nicole! Could you come here, please?"

"Oh yeah," said Rhonda, tugging her hair out from inside her blouse. "I forgot. Your mother wants to say goodbye."

I walked down to meet her. I was feeling so discouraged by Randy that I almost asked my mom to take me back home. But I didn't.

"Nicki," she said, "I'm going now. Mrs. Winkler says that you'll be done by four, and she's very kindly bringing you home—make sure you thank her. Now, since you're going to the mall, I'm giving you some money. Be careful with it, okay?" She pressed a bill in my hand, kissed me, and left. Then I saw she'd given me twenty dollars! Maybe the day would turn out all right, after all.

When I got back upstairs, I could hear the music booming from Rhonda's room. I didn't recognize the song, and for a moment I was afraid to go in. But my mother was already gone. So I gently pushed open the door.

Rhonda and Randy were dancing. Well, Randy wasn't dancing, exactly, she was more standing in time to the music. But Rhonda looked great. Her long hair was bouncing up and down against her striped pullover, and her tight jeans showed off how good her

figure was. She had her back to me at first, but then she spun around so I could see her face. She was biting her lip to keep from laughing, but finally she burst out, "Oh, Randy, not that way! You're like a baby hippo!"

"I am not!"

"You are."

I squeezed into the corner as quietly as possible, and disappeared behind *Glamour*.

"Randy! Quit stepping on me! You have two left feet."

"I don't!" Randy stopped short and looked around. "Anyway, I'm better than Genius there. She wouldn't even try to dance."

That much was true.

"I'll bet you anything she could do better than you," said Rhonda. "Hey, Nicole, get up. You show her." She pulled the magazine away from my face and stood me on my feet. "Come on, give it a try. Like this."

"Just look at her." Randy shook her head. "She can hardly even walk without falling on her face. You call that better than me?"

"Randy, shut up. You're not giving her a chance." Rhonda looked at my feet. "There, see—you're getting the hang of it."

It didn't feel that way. My feet stepped all over each other and my shoelace came undone. "Honestly, Rhonda, I don't think this is for me. I'd better sit down." She tried to keep me dancing longer, but I bent in the middle and plopped down on the floor.

"Oh, all right," she said. "But I still think you were better than Bigfoot, there."

At about twelve o'clock, Mrs. Winkler called us down for lunch—chicken-salad sandwiches and carrots and tomatoes. Well, actually, that's what she served us—she only had an apple and a dish of cottage cheese. Even though I was starving, I waited to see what Rhonda ate and then took exactly the same: half a sandwich and a few carrot sticks. Meanwhile, Randy gobbled two whole helpings. Her mouth was so full she couldn't even talk when Mrs. Winkler asked her if she was coming with us to the mall.

"She can't. She has a piano lesson with Mrs. Wichovsky," Rhonda answered.

"Oh. All right, then, we'll drop her off." Thank goodness, I thought. I'd had about all I could stand.

A few minutes later we climbed into the car, with the two of them in back. In spite of all the grumbling at each other they'd done before, now everything between them seemed rosy. I could hear Randy goofing around and talking in weird voices, and every once in a while both of them would laugh. Finally the car pulled over and Mrs. Winkler twisted around to the back seat. "Okay, Randy, this is your stop."

But Randy wasn't ready to leave. She suddenly pretended her foot was glued to the floor.

"I can't get out! I'm stuck!" she hollered, tugging on her leg. "I must have stepped into some bubble gum! I can't go to my lesson with Mrs. Wichovsky!"

"Randy Huckaby, did you get gum on my clean car?"

"Oh, Mom, she's just kidding around. Come on, Randy, quit clowning. We have to go."

"I'm not clowning. I'm stuck." She yanked at her foot once more.

"You're acting like an idiot."

"*I'm* acting like an idiot!" Randy shoved her chin out, and her face turned bright pink. "*I'm* not the one who's going shopping with the Brain."

"That's none of your business. Besides, you don't even like shopping."

"Not with her, I don't."

Suddenly Rhonda sat straight up in her seat. "Well, I invited her," she snapped. "And I wouldn't have asked you even if you didn't have your piano lesson. I wouldn't have asked you even if I had to go by myself."

Randy jerked her foot out of the car and slammed the door.

"Rhonda!" Mrs. Winkler said, "what's gotten into you? How can you speak to your friend that way?"

"Well, she was making fun of Nicole. That wasn't nice either."

"It's okay," I said in the teeniest voice.

Mrs. Winkler rolled down the car window. "Randy, don't pay attention to her. She was very rude." But I don't think Randy heard. She was already huffing her way up Mrs. Wichovsky's front walk.

4

It was hard to believe, but it seemed like Rhonda really wanted to go to the mall with me. She leaned forward and smiled at me, and I smiled back. It was turning into a wonderful day.

We parked the car and walked in together, but then Mrs. Winkler asked us if we'd like to go off on our own for a while.

"I have to go to Dobkin's to buy an evening dress," she said. "Why don't you meet me there in the After Five Shop in about an hour?" So Rhonda and I set off by ourselves.

Now, to tell the truth, I've always thought shopping was one of the worst experiences in life. But that was because I went with my mother, who is superefficient. She marches straight into the department she's interested in, and then traps me in the dressing room without any clothes on. She keeps bringing me more and more stuff—try this on, try that on—and don't forget this one, it's on sale—so I don't even get a chance to breathe. And she's always looking for bargains. If it's marked down, I get three of it, even if it's olive green.

Besides that, there's the problem of changing and having to see myself in the mirror. It's especially bad in those big fitting rooms, the kind without curtains, where you have to undress in front of a zillion other people. I usually try to find a corner and sit a lot, so no one will see the white cotton underpants I have to wear. Meanwhile, the other girls will be standing in front of the mirror, showing off their gorgeous long legs and lace bikini briefs. I really hate it. Of course, it used to be even worse. I used to not even get to wear a bra.

But shopping with Rhonda was totally different. It was neat the way she could always spot the most unusual things, things I would never have noticed myself. She had an eye for it. We went into a few stores, and she bought socks with tiny polka dots on them and a barrette shaped like a rainbow with a pot of gold at the end.

"What do you think?" she said, holding it up to her hair. All I could do was smile and nod. I couldn't find the words for how pretty she looked.

Watching her made me want to buy something, too, and I kept thinking about my twenty dollars. But I didn't know how to begin. Then we walked past a candy stand, and I got an inspiration.

"Do you like chocolate?" I asked Rhonda suddenly.

"Sure."

"Well, wait here."

I ran back and looked in the case for the most delicious thing they had.

"A quarter pound of chocolate-covered jellies," I

said finally, holding out my money. The lady put the chocolates in a little white bag, and I carried them back to Rhonda.

"What did you get?" she asked. "Ooh, I love those. And I'm starving."

So was I. Half a sandwich isn't very filling. "Here, help yourself," I said, holding out the bag. We ate every last one.

When we finished eating, we walked some more and looked at windows, and in each one Rhonda would point to something—a scarf, or a bracelet, or a red leather belt—and it would always be the best thing in the store. I really admired her. But after a while, I started to feel stupid because I hadn't bought anything but candy. Here I was with almost twenty dollars and I was too dumb to know how to spend it.

Finally, at the far end of the mall, we came to a lingerie shop, which I'd probably been past a million times with my mother and never noticed. But now I stopped, my heart thumping.

"Rhonda," I said, leaning close and whispering in her ear, "you know what I'd really like?"

She pulled back and tugged her earlobe. "Nicole, what are you doing? You want to buy something here?" I nodded. "All right, let's go in." But I felt rooted to the spot. "Oh, come on, don't be so shy," she said, and pushed me through the door.

There was a lot more stuff inside than you could see from the mall. I had never known there were so many kinds of underwear in the world. With all those

beautiful colors, it was like a store full of ice-cream sundaes.

"Can I help you girls?" said the saleslady.

Rhonda nudged me, but then she saw I couldn't talk. "We'd like to look at the panties," she said in a voice as clear as crystal.

"Any special kind? Bikinis, or tap pants . . ."

"Bikinis," Rhonda said.

So the lady showed us the rack where they were hanging. Fortunately, she didn't look at me. I knew I was about as bright red and as graceful as a fire engine.

"You girls just look around," she said. "Call me if you need help."

The rows of satin and lace seemed to stretch for miles. I could even see the pair I wanted, coral pink, but I didn't feel right touching them. Suppose my hands weren't clean.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Nicole," Rhonda broke in at last. "Which ones do you want? These?" She pulled out a deep red pair, and I shook my head. "These?" I pointed, and she grabbed the right pair and stuffed them in my hands.

"Now go try them on," she said. "And lighten up. It's not that serious."

I went into the changing room, a tiny cubicle with a ledge to sit on. It took me forever to untie my shoes and wriggle out of my stiff jeans. You have to take off almost everything to try on panties.

"How do they look?" Rhonda called, after a few

minutes. The doorknob twisted, and my heart jumped into my throat.

"I'm not dressed!" I yelled, pulling up the underpants as fast as I could. Did she really think I would let her open the door while I was practically naked? She made me so nervous, I never looked at the panties once I had them on—just took them right off again, dove back into my clothes, and slid out of the changing booth.

"So were they cute?" Rhonda asked. "Are you going to get them?" She pried open my fist and pulled out a crumpled pink ball. "Oh, Nicole." She wagged her head. "You're really funny. Why are you so shy? Well, let's just pay and go."

Outside in the mall, I wobbled to a bench and sat down. From the corner of my eye I could see that Rhonda had her new barrette in her hair. She was beautiful—just absolutely perfect. And I thought about how I'd acted in the store, what a dumbbell I'd been. Maybe Rhonda was sorry now she had let me come. Maybe she wished she'd brought someone else instead.

"Rhonda," I noisily crinkled the bag in my lap, "are you and Randy really best friends? I mean, she was telling me that the two of you have known each other practically forever."

"Yeah. Since second grade."

"Then you must like her a lot, to stay friends for so long."

"I guess so. She's not exactly special, but she's all

right." Suddenly Rhonda started to giggle. "You want to know something about Randy?" she said in a whisper. "C'mere, I'll show you."

She grabbed me by the sleeve and dragged me a couple of doors down to a piano and organ store.

"You know what Randy sounds like when she has her lesson with Mrs. Wichovsky?" Rhonda said. "This is what she sounds like!" She ran inside, to one of the electric pianos, and smushed down all ten fingers at once, so she hit about fifteen notes. Then she spread out her elbows and leaned on the keyboard. The piano was on one of those settings where whatever you touch keeps playing, so it sounded like a herd of dying elephants.

"Girls, girls!" A skinny salesman with a mustache came hurrying over. "Girls, if you don't know how to use the instrument I must ask you to leave it alone."

But by this time both of us were bent over laughing. Rhonda fell off the piano bench, and I tried to pick her up and landed on top of her.

"Girls! You're creating a nuisance! I'll call the manager! I'll have you removed from the store!"

We struggled to our feet. I couldn't stand up straight, my stomach hurt so much, and we had to lean on each other to keep from falling.

"Will you please leave the premises!" the man said, pushing us toward the door. But at the last minute I took a quick step sideways, reached for another piano, and tinkled the keys. Rhonda streaked off in the opposite direction, and the two of us ran in a huge circle,

plinking and plunking all the pianos in the store. We got to the exit at the same time and dashed out, with the man screaming behind us.

"It shouldn't be permitted!" he yelled. "You shouldn't be allowed in the mall without an adult!" We raced into the crowd, weaving around all the people, and we didn't stop until we reached the farthest end of the mall, where we sank to the floor, leaning our backs against a storefront.

"So now you see what I mean about Randy," Rhonda said, holding her hand around her throat and letting her tongue hang out. I nodded.

"Yeah. She doesn't play the piano too good."

"What?" Then she realized I was kidding. "Oh, I get it."

For a moment we sat, catching our breath. But then I had to ask. "Rhonda?" I whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Rhonda, if that's the way you feel, how come you two stayed friends for so long?"

Rhonda had to think about it. She twisted her hair around her finger. "I guess in my old school there wasn't much choice. You know what I mean? All the kids were sort of like that. That's why my mom—my mom and me—wanted this honors program so much. I mean, it was partly so I could learn more. But partly it was so I could make some, well, better friends."

And I realized she meant me. My heart pounded again, as if I'd never stopped running. "Maybe we'd better go back," I said, hastily getting to my feet. "Look . . . it's been almost two hours."

Rhonda took a deep breath and stretched. "Oh, all right, let's go." She put out her hand for me to help her up.

"I bet your mother will be mad," I said. "We were supposed to be back almost an hour ago . . ."

"She won't mind."

"My mom hates it when I'm late. She says that it's very irresponsible, because anything can happen to you nowadays, and if I'm late she doesn't know where I am, and that . . ."

"Well, my mother isn't like your mother," Rhonda snapped.

I stopped right in the middle of my sentence. I had said the wrong thing. It was as if I'd criticized Mrs. Winkler, which was the last thing I'd meant to do. We walked back to Dobkin's and into the After Five Shop, with neither of us saying a word. And even though it was almost three-thirty by then, Rhonda had been right, her mother wasn't angry.

"Oh, hello, sweetie. Is it time to go already?"

She hadn't even noticed we were late. The saleslady was putting her dress in a box—I could just see the corner of it, shiny and black—and I tried to imagine my mother wearing it but couldn't. My mother could never wear a dress like that. And I thought, I must have been crazy to say anything bad about Mrs. Winkler.

When she finished paying, we went out to the car. Rhonda sat up in front with her mother and listened to her tell about how hard it had been to find the dress. Meanwhile, in the back seat, I was wishing I

could fade away. I had probably just ruined everything with my big mouth. Finally we got to my house and they let me off.

"See you on Monday," I called, trying to sound like nothing had happened. "Thank you for taking me, I had the most wonderful time." Maybe the best time I'd ever have. For a little while, Rhonda Winkler and I had almost been like friends.

5

"Nicole, wake up! Where are you, in outer space?"

It was lunch period, about three weeks after our trip to the mall. Rhonda and I were sitting together in the cafeteria, and for the tenth time I hadn't heard what she had said. I didn't mean to be rude. It was just that I had something on my mind.

Luckily, Rhonda hadn't stayed mad at me after our trip to the mall. I guess she knew I hadn't meant to say such stupid things. Besides, Mr. Nathan had given us lots more work to do, after the advertising booklets, so Rhonda and I had to study together once or twice a week. But I liked to think that there was more than that between us by now. Most of the time she sat with me at lunch, instead of with her old friends. She invited me over on Saturdays even when we didn't have homework, and she let me try on her makeup and jewelry. One Friday she slept at my house. I figured she didn't have to do all that because we were partners on our project for school.

"Nicole, did you hear what I said?"

"Oh, sorry. I was daydreaming."

I tried to pay attention while she told me about the terrific pants she had seen at Boo-Teek, and the Madonna record she was going to buy, but it was hard to concentrate. It had been hard for me to concentrate on anything since I had gotten my letter from California.

It was almost by accident that I found it in the box on Monday, when I got home from school. Usually I don't bother to look at the mail, because there's never anything for me. But this time, when I took out the supermarket circulars and electric bills, I saw a blue envelope underneath, marked *Personal* and addressed to Miss Nicole Aldrich.

I went into the house and sat down at the kitchen table to read it. There was no return address on the outside. Inside, it went like this:

Dear Nicole,

I am writing you this letter because my mother said that maybe we might want to be friends. You don't know me, but my mother and your mother used to be friends a long time ago. They don't see each other now because we live in California.

I like it here. We live near Hollywood. Last year I went one time to a college course at U.C.L.A. that my father was teaching about film. I'm going to be a movie director. My parents are writers and they do scripts for the movies, but now they

want to go back East and write soap operas. I think that's disgusting. I hate soap operas, and besides, I don't want to leave here. But anyway I might have to, so my mother said I should write to you so I would know somebody in New Jersey.

I am fourteen and my name is Andrew. Do you like soap operas or movies better?

Your maybe friend,
Andrew Dennis

At the bottom of the signature was an address where I could write back.

For a few minutes I sat there staring at it. Nobody ever wrote to me—least of all a boy. And he seemed to expect an answer. What was I going to do? I took the letter to my room and stuffed it into my bureau drawer, so I could think it over.

But that night at dinner my mother asked me about it.

"Nicki, did you happen to get a letter from Andrew Dennis today? Kitty told me he was planning to write to you."

My mouthful of orange juice slid down the wrong way, and for the next two or three minutes I coughed. Finally I managed to rasp, "How did you know about that?"

"I just explained, Nicole. His mother mentioned it. She called late last night from California and said that they were thinking of moving back East and that she'd encouraged Andrew to write to you, so he'd have a

friend here." A funny half smile flickered over her face. "It certainly was good news for me. Kitty and I used to be great friends, years ago." She looked up briskly. "I hope you'll answer him, Nicki. I'm sure he's a nice boy."

"Isn't she a bit young for a boyfriend?" my father put in. He always kids me about that, to get me mad.

"He's not a boyfriend!" I sputtered. "He's not even a friend. Maybe I won't even write back to him."

"He's a friend of the family," my mother said. And my father smiled into his baked potato.

I really hate my dad teasing me about that. But somehow, once he brought up the idea, it was hard to get it out of my head. Having a boyfriend thousands of miles away seemed so romantic. And suppose later he came to New Jersey? We could go on dates. We could . . . But then I stopped short. There was just one little thing wrong—for that stuff to happen, I would have to write back.

What could you say to a boy? For days I racked my brain, but nothing sounded right. Finally I realized I couldn't do it by myself. I needed help, and I knew where to get it—Rhonda. She must have had a dozen boyfriends by now, this would be a snap for her. But somehow, I couldn't work up my nerve to ask. That's why I was nodding and smiling, but not really listening, while she talked about clothes and records.

Rhonda was asking me for the third time if I had heard what she said, when out of nowhere came a heavy thump on the table. A square little truck had

zoomed down on us. Randy, of course. Right away she grabbed my lunch bag and made herself at home.

"Give that back," I said.

"What's the matter, Brain? Don't you believe in sharing? Or is that idea too hard for you?" She stuck her nose in the bag, saw it was empty, and then crumpled it up in disgust. "So, Rhon," she said, "I guess you two are still doing your homework together. Me and some of the other kids were just saying how you haven't had lunch with us all week."

It didn't take an Einstein to figure out that we were doing homework. We'd been discussing the next assignment, and our books were spread all over the table.

"Let's see what they're doing in the genius class," said Randy. She reached out and opened a book. But not just any book. *The* book. The one I had slipped my letter into, in the hope of finding the courage to show it to Rhonda. Before I could do anything, the paper went fluttering onto Randy's lap.

"What's this, your crib sheet?" she said to me. I leaned forward to snatch it back, but it was too late. She was already unfolding it. And then she started to read it out loud.

I leaned my elbows on the table and covered my face. The thought of Rhonda reading that letter was bad enough. But Randy! Even the boys at the far end of the table from us could hear. Randy had plenty of lung power.

When it was finished, Rhonda turned to me. "Why,

Nicole," she said, "I didn't know you had a letter from a boy."

"No, well . . . neither did I. I mean, I only just got it on Monday."

Randy sniffed. "I'll bet your boyfriend's not as handsome as Rhonda's was, anyway. Last year, the cutest boy in the whole class liked her. Michael Dorflinger."

"Oh, Randy. That was just kid stuff."

"Yeah? That's not what you said last year."

Rhonda reached across to me and took the letter. "May I?"

"Sure." She read it slowly through, and then carefully folded it and handed it back. "Is he really from Hollywood?" she asked.

"It was postmarked Beverly Hills."

She nodded. "It's very nice."

"Michael would have written nicer letters than that," said Randy, "Except he didn't need to, because he saw Rhonda every day."

"Come on, Randy. That's enough." She turned to me. "So? What are you going to do about it? Did you write back?"

"Not yet. To be honest, I wasn't sure what to say."

"I can imagine," said Randy.

For a moment no one spoke. Then Randy piped up again. "Say, Rhonda, I've got an idea. Maybe *you* should write to him."

"Me? What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? I mean write. You know, that

stuff we learned in second grade? You do it with a pencil and paper . . ."

"Randy!" She shook her head. "I couldn't do that. I can't steal Nicole's boyfriend."

"What boyfriend? All he did was write one letter. He wants to know someone in New Jersey. So why not you?" She paused. "Besides, he's exactly your type. He's interested in the movies."

"Are you interested in the movies?" I asked, turning to Rhonda.

"Of course she is. She's going to be a famous actress when she grows up. I already told you that." I had forgotten. "Rhonda always got the best parts in our elementary-school shows. She played Sarah in *Guys and Dolls*."

"Is that good?" Nobody answered me.

Randy shifted from side to side in her seat. "Seriously, I think you should do it," she said.

"I can't," said Rhonda. She started to tidy the wrappers from lunch. "In the first place, it's dishonest, and besides that, I don't have the time."

"Well, maybe," I said, my voice coming out high and squeaky, "you could help *me* answer the letter. That wouldn't be dishonest, and it would only take a few minutes."

"Well, maybe so. But I still don't think it's a great idea. Come on, Nicole. We'll be late for class."

Obviously that was the end of the discussion. We picked up the rest of our junk and threw it in the trash, and Rhonda and I left for social studies. Then

for the next hour, while Mr. Nathan lectured, I thought. There was something funny about the way Rhonda had clammed up over this. Usually she liked to help. Maybe it was because Randy was there and Rhonda didn't want to seem *too* friendly to me. On the other hand, I'd helped her lots of times. What about "Techniques of Persuasion"?

And then, just as if he had read my mind, Mr. Nathan cleared his throat and said, "Now the moment you've all been waiting for," and started to hand back our graded booklets. "I must say, the class did an excellent job on this project," he added. I smiled at Rhonda across the room. Perfect timing! Now she'd have to remember all the great work we did together.

I bounced up to her after class while she was gathering her papers. "How're you doing?" I said. "Boy, we really aced this one, didn't we?"

She wasn't listening. She was staring at her desk, mashing her papers together any old way. "I hate Mr. Nathan," she said.

Then I saw. Her "Techniques of Persuasion" booklet was peeping out from a pile of other stuff, and it had a big red C marked on the front cover. I could hardly believe it.

"What happened?" I said, pulling it out. "Is this really yours?"

"Of course it's mine." She snatched the pages out of my hand. "I just hate Mr. Nathan, I mean it. He's completely unfair. He picks on me in class, he asks me all these dumb questions . . ."

I hadn't noticed him picking on Rhonda especially. He asked everyone questions in class. But then you don't tend to notice about other people.

"It's only one mark, Rhonda," I said. "It's not that important."

"That's what you think. You don't have to show it to my mom. Besides, how would you know what it's like? You probably got an A, as usual." She stared straight at me—I had to nod yes. "You see," she said. "And the thing is, we did them together. They're practically the same, yours and mine, except for those thingies . . ."

"Captions."

"Yeah, captions. What we wrote underneath."

I sighed. I didn't understand it either. But then, what can you expect from teachers? They can be very prejudiced. It seemed to me that the important thing was for Rhonda not to feel bad just because Mr. Nathan had made a mistake.

"Rhonda . . ." I began. But she didn't let me finish my sentence.

"Nicole," she said, "if you're trying to ask me about your letter again, you'd better forget it. I told you it wasn't a good idea for me to answer your personal mail. You'll have to do it yourself."

How could she think I'd ask about the letter at a time like this? But now that she'd misunderstood me, the subject would be closed for good. I sagged like a popped balloon. Still, I said to myself, you can't really blame her. If you can't make up your own letter to

write, you don't deserve a boyfriend. And to think that Rhonda is upset because school is unfair. *Life* is unfair. Or else I wouldn't have to be me. Here I get this terrific opportunity of writing to a boy from Hollywood, with parents in the movie business, even—and I'm so dumb I can't take advantage of it.

Later that night I sat gloomily on my bed and considered my prospects, if you could call them that. It seemed pretty certain I was going to blow it with Andrew. I'd been friends with Rhonda for a month now, and what difference had it made? None. She'd helped pick out new clothes for me, and she'd shown me how to do my hair, but all that new stuff looked like it belonged on someone else. I was just the Brain with trimmings.

But then, as I sat there, it occurred to me that Andrew didn't know how I looked. He didn't know me at all. Maybe if I could just embroider the truth a little bit . . . after all, with a letter all that counts is how you sound. I ought to have brains enough to at least *sound* fashionable and popular. Maybe, if I tried hard enough, I could even sound like Rhonda Winkler.

I smiled. I got out paper and a pen and closed my eyes, and imagined how it would feel to have a petite figure, long brown hair, and the most stylish wardrobe in Pipertown.

"Dear Andrew," I began. "I'm sorry I didn't answer you right away, but I had millions of things to do. I have lots of friends and I'm very busy going to parties all the time." I scribbled away as fast as my hand

would go, not stopping to think. I wrote and wrote—well, someone did, but it wasn't me, exactly—it was some other Nicole that I had never known before. And when the letter was all finished, I sealed it tight in an envelope, wrote out the address, and slipped it under my pillow for the night. I felt as if I were under a magic spell that I didn't want to break. Then, the next morning, without even daring to look at it again, I dropped the letter in a mailbox on the way to school, and sent it flying to California.

6

I didn't hear from Andrew Dennis for a long time after that—almost, but not quite, long enough for me to forget about him. When I thought about it at all, which I tried not to, I felt like an idiot for having pretended to be so smart and sophisticated. I was sure the reason he hadn't answered was that I hadn't fooled him. He had seen right through me, and knew what a dufus I was underneath.

But then one day, in the middle of November, I came home from school and found a blue envelope in the mail. He hadn't given me up, after all! I raced into the house and tore it open. The letter inside went like this:

To Mademoiselle Nicole Aldrich,
Mr. Andrew Dennis, Esq.,
kindly requests
the pleasure of your company for dinner,
on the 30th of December,
at L'Escargot Restaurant, New York, New York.
Formal attire, please. R.S.V.P.

After that, there was another letter, a normal one, on the next page:

Dear Nicole,

How do you like my card? I copied most of it off an old wedding invitation my mother had. Seriously, though, we're coming to New York for a visit so my parents can see about jobs and moving and stuff, and we're going to stay in a hotel in Manhattan. I'd like it a lot if you could come with me to the restaurant—that is, if you're not busy with a party or something. I guess kids back East do a lot more of that kind of stuff than we do out here. Anyway, L'Escargot is supposed to be a nice place, and I could take you there in a taxi if your parents can bring you to our hotel. You don't have to dress formal unless you want to. That was just on the invitation I copied.

Your friend,
Andrew

P.S. I'm glad you feel the same way I do about TV. Some of the kids around here give soap parties. They tape six whole hours on their VCRs and invite everybody over to watch. Did you ever hear anything so stupid? I once went to an all-day Humphrey Bogart festival, but that was to learn technical stuff. Did you ever see his movies? They're neat.

Andrew

Well. This was more than I had bargained for. I read the note over and over, and then—even though

it went against my general policy—I showed it to my mother when she got home from school. After all, I had to convince her to let me go.

"What do you think?" I asked her when she got to the end.

"I think Mr. Dennis is a very enterprising young man," she said. "I think he sounds like a catch."

"You're making fun of me."

"No, I'm not, Nicki—honestly I'm not. I think it's exciting." She smiled, but then her face clouded over. "The only thing is—this date—it makes me nervous. I mean, the two of you, by yourselves in New York like that. You're so young . . ."

"Mom!" I yelped. "You're not going to ask me to say no!"

"But it's dangerous, Nicki. Maybe we should all do something together instead. Or they could come here for dinner . . ."

"It's not the same. It's not the same at all." I swiped at my eyes with the back of my hand. "You just don't want me to grow up," I said. "You want me to stay a baby forever. And wear health shoes, and cotton underpants." I felt my cheeks grow warm.

My mother took the letter, smoothed it, and read it again.

"He reminds me so much of Kitty," she murmured. "That's how she was when she was a girl. Bright, and imaginative . . ." For a moment she stared far away. Then she pulled up a chair and sat close to me at the table. "You really want to go, don't you?" I nodded.

There was a long pause. She stretched out her hand and ruffled my hair.

"Okay, Nicki." She grinned. "You win. As long as Dad agrees, I give you my permission. But you'll have to do exactly as I say, and be very careful. You have to promise me . . ." She listed all the conditions—go in a taxi from the hotel, come straight back in another taxi—and loaded me with advice about how to carry my pocketbook and walk on the street. A million things. But I was too happy to listen. I nodded and nodded, and agreed to everything.

It was only later, up in my room, that I stopped to wonder why I had been so eager to accept that invitation in the first place. I really must be stupid. Wasn't this just what I'd been hoping *wouldn't* happen? Meeting Andrew in person—I would never pull it off. This wasn't like a letter you could sort of fake. If I didn't get some help, I realized, I was a dead duck. I would have to go to Rhonda and somehow get her to agree. After all, it wasn't so much to ask. She was so good with makeup and clothes. How would it hurt her to give me a few more pointers? And it wasn't as if there was anything dishonest about it. It was a favor, a gift—from one friend to another. I decided to bring it up the very next day in school.

Unfortunately, the next day turned out to be report-card day.

I should have realized that the timing was bad. I knew that Rhonda was having problems with her schoolwork and that she was upset about her grades.

But I was so eager to tell her about Andrew that I forgot all that. I kept myself bottled up at lunchtime—this time I wanted to make sure Randy didn't find out—but as soon as school was dismissed I dashed up to her at the bus stop and launched right in. Only she didn't seem to be listening. She stood there staring at the ground, with her long hair hanging in front of her face and only the pink tip of her nose showing. That's when I realized what must have happened. All my excitement shriveled up and died.

"Hey, Rhon," I said, edging next to her, "are you okay?"

"Just peachy."

"Oh. You're . . . on your way home?"

"What does it look like?"

"I don't know, I thought maybe you were going shopping or something. I guess you don't feel like it."

"Right, Nicole. You're a genius."

I chewed my lip. "Well, maybe you'd like some company. I could come over for a while and visit."

"I don't feel much like entertaining, Nicole. Anyway, don't you have to hurry home and show your mother all the A's on your report card?"

"There's no rush." I knew I sounded idiotic, but I couldn't think what else to answer. "Did you maybe have some trouble with your grades?" I mumbled.

Silently Rhonda yanked out her report card and handed it to me. It was pretty grim—C's in English and social studies, B minus in math. "You got an A in music," I said hopefully.

"Oh, terrific." She snatched back the card.

They started loading the bus and she didn't actually say not to, so I came along and slid in the seat beside her. "Honestly, Rhonda," I said. "You shouldn't get so depressed about it. It's only schoolwork, and you didn't do *that* awful. You got two B's and an A. You didn't fail anything."

"Nicole!" she snapped. "Do you have to broadcast it to the entire school?" Then she added, "Anyway, to my mother a C *is* failing."

"Oh, Rhonda." I sighed. "You're just upset. Your mom will understand." She shook her head. "Rhonda, I *know*. I heard her talking about you. Maybe she wouldn't say it to your face, but she thinks you're great. Please stop worrying." Rhonda only stared out the window.

She didn't say another word until we pulled up in front of her house. "Oh, wonderful," she muttered. "This is just what I need."

"What?"

"Look for yourself. My mother's car is in the driveway. Now I won't even have any time to prepare what to say."

We went in the house and Rhonda got me a glass of milk, but she didn't take anything for herself. Then we climbed the stairs to her room. As we went down the hall, Mrs. Winkler called out from behind her closed door.

"Is that you, dear?"

"Yes, Mom, I'm home." She didn't mention me.

We went in her room, and she closed the door and flopped on the bed. It was like I didn't exist. I sat on the chair in front of the vanity and absentmindedly opened a drawer. There were lots of little jars and bottles of makeup and nail polish inside, and they reminded me of my own problem. Andrew. How was I ever going to bring up the subject of my date now? All because of our stupid schoolwork and stupid grades, I was going to have to miss out on the most important thing in my life.

Just then there was a soft knock on the door, and Mrs. Winkler peeked in.

"Hello, sweetie . . . Oh, Nicole. I didn't know you were here. I was coming to ask Rhonda if she wanted to help me get dressed. You know, I have that cocktail party with Jack Maxwell tonight." Rhonda nodded silently. "All right, darling. Why don't you come in, in about ten minutes? I'll be out of the shower by then." She closed the door gently and then added, "But don't dawdle. Jack will be here at a quarter past five and I can't be late."

"Oh no, we couldn't keep *Jack* waiting," Rhonda said under her breath. She hiked herself up on the bed and hugged her knees.

"Doesn't your mother know how to get dressed by herself?" I asked.

Rhonda shook her head. "Jeez, Nicole. Sometimes you really are dense."

About five minutes later Rhonda got up and went down the hall to her mother's room. I wasn't sure

what else to do, so I followed her. At first I heard the shower running in the little bathroom, but then it stopped and Mrs. Winkler came out, still dripping, and all wrapped up in a terry-cloth robe.

"Gosh, it's late," she said, glancing at the watch on her dresser. "And I still have to do my hair."

Rhonda sat gingerly on the edge of the bed. I didn't have the slightest idea where I was supposed to go. Finally I settled down on the floor in the corner of the room.

Mrs. Winkler walked to her dresser and peered in the mirror. She fluffed her hair. Then she undid the knot on her belt, pulled open her bathrobe, and dropped it to the floor. She wasn't wearing anything underneath.

Instantly my head started to pound. Didn't she remember I was there? She stood completely naked in front of the mirror, turning from side to side, rubbing her hands over her body and down her legs. She leaned closer and flicked at a spot on her nose. Then she opened her dresser drawer and got out some shiny blue panties and stepped into them.

"So, did you have a good day in school?" she asked. "Here, do me up." She had slipped on a blue satin bra. Rhonda fastened it, not answering the question. Mrs. Winkler fished in her drawer and found some panty hose and a slip.

"Get my royal-blue silk, honey," she said, tilting her head toward the closet. Rhonda got the dress and laid it on the bed. I don't know how she

picked it from all the other blue dresses on the rack.

"Thanks." Mrs. Winkler gave a quick nod, and Rhonda smiled. They understood each other so perfectly, they didn't need to talk. And I realized then why Rhonda had been so upset about showing her mother her grades. If my mother and I were friends like that, I'd feel the same way. I'd rather die than disappoint her.

At each step, Mrs. Winkler got more beautiful. Even the way she pulled on her panty hose was special—stretching out her leg and pointing her toe. All her things were slinky and soft. After she got on all her underwear and stockings, she did her hair and makeup. Rhonda handed her what she asked for. Then, finally, she put on the dress. It was gleaming blue, low-cut in front and tight around the middle, and it was short enough so you could see her legs, which were terrific. She could have been a model for *Cosmopolitan*. Sitting there on the floor in the corner, I suddenly felt I was about to cry. That date at L'Escargot Restaurant!—the whole thing was completely impossible. I rubbed the knee of my corduroy pants and watched Mrs. Winkler through the shimmering in my eyes. If only I could wear a dress like that. If only I had high heels, and blue silk shining around me—then I could go anywhere, with anyone. That's how it would be for Rhonda if she was the one going on a date. Her mother would help her, and she'd go looking like a movie star. But who was there to help me? No one. I didn't have a chance.

And that's when inspiration came to me—the way to solve Rhonda's problems and mine. We would just switch report cards. We would show Mrs. Winkler my grades, then Rhonda would be off the hook and I'd have my friend back. As soon as I thought of it, I saw how simple it would be. Our names were only on the front cover, not on the inside. We'd just hand her the card open, distract her, and take it away before she had time to check it carefully. I could hardly wait to finish in Mrs. Winkler's room so I could tell the plan to Rhonda.

Finally, Mrs. Winkler was done dressing. Rhonda and I went back to her room, and as soon as the door closed behind us, I grabbed her by the wrist. "Rhonda," I whispered. "Rhon—I just got the most terrific idea. About your report card and—your mother."

At first Rhonda pulled away. She even pretended not to understand what I was talking about. But little by little she became interested. She watched me steadily, sitting on her bed with her legs crossed under her, twisting her fingers in her hair. Her cheeks were two bright spots of pink.

"Why do you want to do this, Nicole?" she asked in a low voice. "You'll get in trouble if anyone finds out."

"I don't think anyone will find out, Rhonda," I said. "I mean, it's practically foolproof. And if your mother does suspect, we'll say it was a mistake. A mix-up. Besides"—I felt the warmth come up in my cheeks—"I wouldn't mind taking the risk, Rhonda. Not if it

helped you. I want to do something for you, you know? As one friend to another."

My breath caught in my throat. After a long pause, Rhonda looked up.

"Okay," she said. "We'll give it a try." And she sat there, very still, winding her fingers in her hair.

As it turned out, our plan was almost embarrassingly easy to pull off. We waited a few minutes, until we heard the doorbell ring for Mrs. Winkler's date. Then the two of us came downstairs together, and Rhonda brought over the card.

"Rhon—what is it? Oh, for heaven's sake. The times you pick to do things! I have my coat on already . . ."

"I'm sorry. I just forgot."

Mrs. Winkler glanced at the card. "Well, you are modest," she said softly. "I don't see how you could forget grades like this. I'm very proud of you." She bent over to sign her name.

"Just a second. I'll get you a pen." Rhonda snatched away the card and bolted for the kitchen. "I just saw one in here on the counter."

For a long minute she rustled around.

"Rhonda, honey, can't it wait? I'll be late for my party."

"I'm coming right now," Rhonda reappeared in the doorway, smiling. "Here." Rhonda turned the card on its back so Mrs. Winkler could sign it.

"Okay, sweetie, all done." She gave Rhonda a quick kiss. "I'll see you around nine." Then the two of them bustled out and the door shut after them. I flopped

on the couch. I could hardly believe how smoothly it had gone.

"She didn't suspect a thing," I said.

"No, why should she? Here's your card back."

I gave it a quick glance. "But I thought she signed it."

"It's as easy to switch two times as once."

So, I thought, that's what she was doing in the kitchen.

We went back upstairs to Rhonda's room. Rhonda stretched out on her bed while I opened her closet and ran my hand over the rack of dresses. One of them was especially pretty—shiny and blue like her mother's. I lifted it out and held it against me, looking in the mirror.

Rhonda sat straight up. "Nicole, that's my best dress."

I lowered it a little. "Well, I'm not hurting it any."

"Would you please put it back?" Her voice rose a couple of notches. "Nicole! It's two sizes too small for you. And you're getting it all grimy with your hands."

Reluctantly I set it back in place. Then I went to the bed and sat on one corner. "It's a really nice dress," I said.

"Yeah." She reached to her night table and picked up a copy of *Seventeen*. I could feel the moment slipping away.

"Rhonda," I said, much too loud, "how do you think a dress like that would look on me? I mean, if I could find it in my size."

"What?"

"I said, how do you think it would look on me if . . ."

Rhonda sat up taller on the bed and rested the open magazine on her lap. "I don't know, Nicole. What do you need a dress like that for, anyway? Are you going to a wedding or something?"

"Well, no, not exactly." And then I couldn't hold it back any longer. In a rush I told her everything—about Andrew, and the invitation, and L'Escargot Restaurant. "So you see," I finished, "I have to do something. Something special. And I thought, well, since you're so good at it— I mean, since you know so much—" I floundered. "Oh, Rhon, you understand, don't you?"

And then Rhonda gave me the most peculiar glance—her dark eyes so straight and direct they seemed to cut right through me. "Yes," she said quietly. "Yes, Nicole, I think I do understand. You want my help, right? A little help, like one friend to another."

"Yes." I bobbed my head. "That's it, exactly."

"Well," she said, very quietly, "I guess it's the least I can do."

I smiled. In fact, I felt almost ready to dissolve with relief. Until I went home, Rhonda and I talked, and together we sorted out the details. She would pick my makeup and clothes and show me how to carry my head. My friend Rhonda was going to help me. And for once in my life, I was going to be beautiful.

7

"Cynthia! I can't believe it! You look great . . . I can't believe it's been eleven years . . ."

"You too, Kitty . . . and what a tan!"

Blah, blah, blah, I thought. How long are they going to keep me standing here in the hall? I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, feeling hot and itchy under my wool coat. I wasn't used to these clothes—this silky dress and stockings and high—well, two-inch—heels. I fidgeted my feet. All day I'd been waiting and waiting. I was beginning to think my date would never start.

"Well, come in, come in," said Mrs. Dennis at last. "No need for you to wait in the corridor. This may not be home, but at least we can offer a little hospitality." She stepped aside. "Oh, this must be Nicole. It's so nice to meet you. Well, actually, I met you once before, when you were about so high." She smiled, then shook her head. "Listen to me rattling on. You kids have better things to do. Come on inside, I'll go get Andrew from his room."

She bustled away. My mother and father and I took off our coats and sat down in the living room. The sign outside had said this was a hotel, but inside it was more like an apartment, with bedrooms and a living room and fancy furniture, including a huge mirror in a gold frame on the wall facing us. I turned in the other direction. If there was something wrong with how I looked, I didn't want to find out now. It was bad enough I'd had to listen to my mother all day. "That outfit is too mature. You'll fall on your face in those shoes." That sort of thing is terrible for your confidence. Besides, the shoes were perfect. Rhonda had personally selected them. Whereas my mother seemed to expect me to wear sneakers to L'Escargot.

There was a sound of footsteps, and banging doors, and Mrs. Dennis hurried back, with someone behind her.

"Andrew, come on in. I'd like you to meet everyone. This is my old friend Cynthia Aldrich . . ."

I scrunched down in my seat and studied my fingernails. Out of the corner of my eye I could see someone tallish and darkish, in a navy suit.

"Andy, this is Mr. Aldrich, and this is Nicole."

"Hi."

I guess he nodded. I peeked up, biting my lip instead of smiling, while Andrew backed into the opposite corner of the room. He looked extremely unspecial. He had dark brown hair and thick black glasses, and his suit must have been too tight in the collar, because he seemed to be choking. He gave me what I guess was a smile and disappeared into a deep chair.

"So. How do you catch up on eleven years?" Mrs. Dennis smiled and shook her head.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, don't bother, tell me about your plans. Are you coming back to New York?"

Mr. Dennis handed me a ginger ale and I sipped it, letting the bubbles tickle my nose. The grown-ups were talking on and on, about old times and business—I don't know, I couldn't concentrate. I hadn't eaten all afternoon, and my stomach was growling. I could see Andrew's shoes jouncing up and down, but the rest of him was invisible. We didn't seem to be going anywhere.

At last Mr. Dennis cleared his throat and leaned forward. "Andy," he said, "don't you think it's about time to call a cab? Why don't you go down and speak to the doorman?"

"Yes," added Mrs. Dennis. "That's a good idea. Nicole can join you in a couple of minutes."

So Andrew shuffled out, and a few minutes later, my mother walked me into the hall. "Now, you remember everything I told you," she whispered as she fussed with my coat buttons. "Keep your purse next to you at all times, and don't go walking around the streets by yourselves. Take a taxi straight back as soon as you finish supper."

She rode the elevator down with me and walked me to the door.

"And behave like a lady," she said. "Andrew is going to a lot of trouble and expense for you, and he probably feels a bit shy, and—"

"All *right*, Mom," I said. The taxi pulled up outside.

Andrew was standing there with the doorman. "Don't worry, we'll be okay."

She breathed a deep sigh, kissed me, and then waved as I walked out of the lobby. The doorman helped me into the taxi, and Andrew slid in after.

"Bye," I said silently, and waved back. But she probably couldn't see me. I wriggled around, trying to get comfortable in the big back seat, then nearly slid off as the taxi pulled out. Andrew twiddled his hands in his lap and stared at the picture of the cab driver.

Outside, headlights and streetlights and traffic lights flashed past as we sped by. Horns blared, and people rushed along the sidewalks. But in the cab it was dark and cold and quiet as a library. I wished I could think of something to say. It had been a lot easier to make stuff up when I was alone in my room. But anything was better than this silence.

"Have you ever been to New York before?" I stammered. "There's lots of cultural things to do—museums and stuff like that. And the stores are really nice at Christmas."

"No, I've never been away from California." He gave his glasses a shove. "I guess that makes you the expert." Great, I thought, as he turned and stared out the window. Now you've made him feel dumb.

The driver let us out right under the awning of L'Escargot. It was a big white building with lots of windows and a pair of glass doors. Andrew held one open for me, and I walked past him into a little closed-

in booth, through another set of doors, and onto a kind of platform looking down on an enormous room full of mirrors and glass and white tablecloths. About a million waiters in black jackets and bow ties stood around, and the people eating had on gorgeous clothes and jewelry. I pulled my winter coat tighter around me. Standing way up high like this was like being on a stage—everyone could see me. And even my brand-new silky blue dress looked crummy in a place like this.

Down below us at the foot of the platform was a desk with a man in a white jacket sitting at it.

"Good evening, sir. Do you have a reservation?" he said.

"Oh. Yes. That is—I think my father called up."

"Your name?"

"Andrew. I mean, Dennis."

The man gave us a weird look, as if he wanted to say, Which is it, Andrew or Dennis? But then he looked at the huge book he had in front of him.

"Oh yes, here you are. Would you follow me, please?" He took a few steps, then turned around again. "Perhaps you'd like to check the lady's coat?" They both looked at me.

"Oh. I . . . I could keep it." I said. I wasn't sure what happened if you checked it, and besides, I didn't want to take it off until I was in a safe, dark corner.

"All right, Miss, as you wish."

He didn't take us to a corner. We followed him past the center tables, way up to the front of the restaurant,

to a spot near one of the picture windows. He shoved the chair under me when I sat down, squeezing me against the table almost too tight to breathe. I had to wrestle my way out of the coat, and when I finally did get it off, it hung over the edge of the chair and dragged on the floor. I noticed nobody else had kept theirs.

After a couple of minutes, a waiter showed up and poured water in our glasses and gave us menus. When I opened mine, I thought at first there was something wrong with it—I couldn't read a word. Then I realized it was in French.

The words on the page wiggled around like fish. We had hardly begun and already everything was going wrong. Out the window, down the street, I could see a luncheonette selling hamburgers and sandwiches, and I wished we had gone there instead of here. At least I would have understood the menu. I looked at Andrew, who had his head bent down reading. Well, with parents in the movie business, he was probably used to elegant restaurants. He probably spoke perfect French, not that that was any use to me. I would rather have died then ask him for help, and admit how ignorant I was.

I opened my menu and scanned down the list of dishes again, hoping for an inspiration. Luckily, this time I noticed some English words scattered in with the French, something called Steak Napoleon. Well, at least I knew what steak was. When the waiter came back and asked for our orders, I told him I would get that.

"An excellent choice, Miss," he said. "Perhaps you would also care for an appetizer? If nothing on the menu appeals to you, you might like one of the specials. We have a lovely poached salmon, mushroom caps stuffed with . . ."

"Oh," I said. "Well, I'll have that—the mushroom caps, I mean." He smiled. Then my stomach did a flip-flop. The waiter was laughing at me. He knew why I hadn't ordered from the menu—he had told me about the specials in English because he felt sorry for me.

"Would you excuse me, please," I said. I squeezed away from the table and stumbled to the ladies' room. For at least ten minutes I stayed there, blotting my cheeks with wet paper towels. Before I left, I looked in the mirror and saw that my makeup was all gone and I had a nose like Rudolph the Reindeer. But what did that matter now?

Back at our table, they had already brought the first course. They want to get rid of us quick, I thought. I edged into my seat, and Andrew, who was eating his onion soup, dropped his spoon.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh. I dunno. Sorry," he mumbled.

I tried to eat. I pressed my fork into a mushroom cap, and it shot off my plate. I picked it up as inconspicuously as I could, but it left a big blotch on the white tablecloth. I slid the salt shaker over to cover it.

It didn't seem right to sit there without talking, but

everything I thought of to say was boring or childish. We couldn't talk about school or teachers or hobbies in a place like L'Escargot. Finally I gathered all my courage and asked Andrew if he was going to see any shows in New York.

"We have tickets for *A Chorus Line* and *Cats*. And maybe something Off-Broadway." He paused and pushed his black glasses higher on his nose. "Have you seen those?"

The only thing I'd ever seen was the Ice Capades. But I certainly couldn't tell Andrew that, not after trying to sound so sophisticated in my letters.

"No, we don't get in to the theater much," I said, dabbing my mouth with the corner of my napkin. "Broadway's not what it used to be." That is, according to my mother and father. But I didn't mention that part. Andrew looked up at me a moment.

"Oh. I didn't know that." He ducked his head and went back to drinking soup. And I went back to wishing I could disappear.

But, as it turned out, I didn't disappear. Quite the opposite. Because about five minutes later our main course was brought out, and I became the star attraction of L'Escargot Restaurant.

The first inkling I had of what was about to happen was when two waiters came out of the kitchen carrying a gigantic platter, which was shooting flames about two feet into the air. Look at that, I almost said. Something must have caught fire and they're taking it to the street to get rid of it. But the waiters

didn't go toward the door, they came toward us—walking very slowly and carefully, like in a procession. They must be burning it on purpose, I realized. I looked all around, trying to figure out where they were going. People began to whisper and turn in their seats. Some smiled and pointed. Then one of the waiters scurried over and opened up this tray gadget, and the other one set the platter down right in front of us. No. Right in front of *me*. That enormous flaming platter was for me.

"Your steak, Mademoiselle," he said. "And here's your entrée, Monsieur."

They gave Andrew a plate with lamb chops or veal cutlet, I don't know, something normal. My dinner was still on fire. A minute or so later, the flames went out, and the waiter lifted the most humongous piece of meat I had ever seen onto my plate. It was more steak than my whole family eats for dinner. And Andrew had a couple of teeny lamb chops. I felt like a totally gross pig.

"Enjoy your dinner," the waiter said.

Enjoy the dinner? I thought. Very funny. I stabbed my steak and it slid across the plate. I didn't feel like eating it, anyway. I could hardly believe that back in the hotel my stomach had been growling. On the other hand, it didn't seem polite not to even touch my food, especially since Andrew polished off his lamb chops in about two minutes. He still looked hungry, and I thought about giving him some of my dinner. But that's the kind of thing you do with your parents, not

on a date. So I just munched away while he watched, and tried my best not to spill sauce on my lap. I could hear myself chewing, going *squelch squelch* with every bite.

After about a thousand years, the waiter came back and asked if we were done. There was still a lot of steak left.

"Yes, thank you," I whispered.

"Would you like me to wrap this for you?" he asked.

I was shocked. Did he think I was that stupid? Even I knew better than to take doggy bags home from a fancy restaurant.

The waiter brought the dessert menu. I decided not to get anything, so I'd look less piggy. Andrew got a piece of chocolate cake. Then it was my turn to watch him while he ground the cake into tiny crumbs and ate them like they were medicine.

It seemed it would never end, but at last it did. Andrew paid and we put on our coats, standing in the closed-in booth between the two sets of doors. The whole meal had gone by and we had spoken two sentences.

"I guess we'd better go," Andrew said.

"Yeah. I had a very nice time." It came out sounding really lame. We both knew how terrible it had been.

8

We buttoned our coats and walked out to the street. You could feel it was December 30. The wind bit through my stockings to my ankles, my eyes watered, my nose ran. Andrew was shivering—his coat wasn't as warm as mine, and he was used to California. Everything was cold, cold, cold. Six weeks of waiting and planning, and in one hour, Andrew and I were finished. Kaput. I looked up and down the deserted street. I didn't even know how we would get home.

"Maybe we could find a taxi on the cross street over there," Andrew said, pointing. "It looks kind of busier." We started to walk.

How could I have been so stupid, I wondered, hurrying along with my hands stuck in my armpits. I must have been crazy to go on this date. I trotted to keep up with Andrew, who was a few steps ahead of me, and my heels wobbled on the bumpy concrete. What a fool I had made of myself, wearing a fancy dress and high heels—like when I was little and put on my mother's shoes and lipstick, playing at being grown

up. Only I wasn't little anymore, and I was still ridiculous. Age had nothing to do with it. The problem was me, the kind of person I was. I would never be chic and sophisticated, like the ladies in the restaurant, or Rhonda, or Mrs. Winkler. I would always look like I was pretending, and people would always see through it, see it was just me underneath, and I would fall flat . . .

And then I did. Right on my face, the way my mother had said. I'd caught my heel and fallen smack on the pavement.

"Ow!" I yelled.

Andrew turned around. "What happened?" Then he saw, and rushed back. "Nicole, are you all right?"

I was, mostly, but I was so mad I screamed again at the top of my lungs, and whacked my pocketbook against the sidewalk.

"Nicole! Did you hurt yourself? Maybe you sprained an ankle or something . . ."

"I'm fine!" I shouted, right in his face. Then, a little lower, I added, "I'll be all right in a minute."

He knelt down and helped me to my feet.

"Wow," he said, brushing me off in back, "that was some dive you took. You could have really got hurt."

"I guess I'm just lucky." I pulled my coat around me and shook him off. I was a mess. My hands were scraped and my stockings had a run. I felt like I'd stepped out of a trash can.

"Come on, let's find a taxi," I said, and started

down the street. But something was wrong. I couldn't walk properly. Nothing hurt, but I kept tripping and losing my balance. Then I looked down. My left heel had broken off.

"Do you believe that!" I shouted. "Just look! My brand-new shoes!" I picked up the broken piece and threw it in the gutter. "How am I supposed to walk like this?" I took a few steps—high-low, high-low. "Well, it serves me right," I muttered. "That's what I get for trying to act glamorous."

We stood there for a moment, not sure what to do.

"Do you think you can make it to the corner?" Andrew said at last. "There are more cars down there, and we could get a taxi. Come on, I'll give you a hand."

I shrugged. There wasn't much choice. Andrew stood next to me, holding my elbow and getting in my way. I knew he was only trying to help, but I was too mad to appreciate it. "You don't have to be so nice to me, Andrew. I already know you feel sorry for me."

"I don't feel sorry for you, Nicole. I was worried. I mean, I *am* sorry you fell down, but . . ."

"I wasn't referring to my falling down. I was talking about the date, about how I acted. And you don't have to try to be nice to me, because I already know that I've made a complete idiot of myself." I steamed off down the street. Even wearing a broken shoe I outdistanced him.

"Nicole! Wait a minute!"

"I should have listened to my mother," I fumed,

more to myself than to him. "She tried to tell me. I was just too stubborn to listen."

"To listen to what? Nicole!"

"She kept on saying the shoes and the dress were too mature. Only she had it the wrong way around. The clothes are fine. *I'm* just too *im*mature."

"*Nicole.*" There was a sharp tug on my elbow. "Would you please wait?" He ran a few steps and grabbed my arm tight. "Nicole, you shouldn't talk like that, saying all this bad stuff."

"It's true, every word."

"Maybe you think so. But I thought . . ." His grip on my arm loosened, and his voice dropped to a whisper. "I thought you looked really nice in that dress. Well, beautiful, actually."

"You're just saying that."

"I'm not. I thought that as soon as I saw you. And I wanted to tell you, but I was too shy. I was afraid I'd sound like a dope." He took a deep breath. "Your letters always sounded so grown-up and smart. And I never know what to say. I was sure if I tried to tell you what I thought it would come out, well, stupid."

"But, Andrew." My throat felt strangled and my voice was a funny squeak. "Andrew, I'm the dope. I made up that stuff in my letters, about how glamorous and popular I was. It's not true. I'm not like that at all."

"You aren't?"

"No. Not even a little bit." I stared at my toes and whispered. "I'm just . . . ordinary. I don't wear stylish

clothes, and I don't go to parties. I'm not even popular—all I have is one best friend. That other stuff I wrote you was . . . lies."

He let go of my arm, and for a moment we limped in silence down the street.

"Wasn't any of it true?" he said at last.

"No." I shrugged. "Except for the part where I signed it 'Your friend.' That is—I'd like to be friends. But I guess you don't want to now."

"I didn't say that." He tipped his head to one side. "It's funny but— To tell the truth, I think I like you better this way. You were kind of stuffy before." And then he grinned. I could just barely see it, in the light from the street lamp. He looped his arm through mine. "I'm awfully glad you fell down," he said. And I laughed out loud.

We stumped arm in arm—high-low, high-low—to the corner. There was an ice-cream parlor there.

"You want some dessert?" he asked.

"You bet." I suddenly felt as if I hadn't eaten all day. He smiled and swung the door wide open for me.

Inside the shop, the air was warm and sticky-sweet. We found a table and I flopped my coat over the back of my chair without worrying about it. Andrew went to the counter and came back with two sundaes—pineapple and butterscotch, with cherries on top. The works. Delicious.

"See," I said, taking a gooey bite, "the reason all this happened was sort of because of my friend Rhonda.

You know, my best friend, the one I told you about. Not that it's her fault or anything. But it sort of happened because of her. You see, she's very stylish and sophisticated and everything. And I wanted to be like her. You know, so I'd look good."

"I already told you, Nicole. You do look good. You look great."

"Oh, but not like her. She's beautiful. And nice, too. In fact, I almost thought you might like her better than me, 'cause she's interested in acting. She's going to be a big star when she grows up."

"Yeah?"

"Absolutely."

"Hmm." For a few seconds he swirled butterscotch sauce into his vanilla ice cream. "Well, I guess I might like her," he went on at last. "If she's your best friend and all. But you know, Nicole, I could never go on a date with someone like that."

"No?"

"Unh unh. Too risky. You know what they say, show-business relationships never work out."

"They don't? How about your parents?"

"Oh, them. They're just writers, that doesn't count. What I meant was real entertainment people—like actors and directors. A director—that's what I want to be." And he started to tell me about it—about the courses he took, and which movies were the best, and what life was like in Hollywood. It sounded really exciting, to know all that behind-the-scenes stuff. I started to feel that maybe I was missing the boat.

"Andrew," I said over my last spoonful of ice cream,

"did you really mean it, what you said? About show-biz relationships?"

"What? Oh, that. No, I was only kidding." He tipped back his chair. "But why do you want to know? You think maybe you might get interested in acting?"

"Who, me?"

"Sure, why not? Maybe you could be in a school play or something."

"Oh, I couldn't," I answered, almost falling over the words. "What—get up and sing in front of strangers?"

"Why not? Unless you can't carry a tune."

"Of course I can." I sniffed. "As a matter of fact, I have a very good voice. I just don't like to show off."

Andrew laughed. "Okay, Nicole, you win. You don't have to act for my sake. I just thought it would give us more in common, that's all." And he smiled so I'd know there were no hard feelings.

After that, Andrew went out to find a taxi while I waited in the ice-cream parlor. It was funny how the evening had turned out—like a bad dream with a happy ending. When he came back, he was all pink from the cold. He held the door for me, and helped me across the sidewalk and into the cab. Then he slid beside me—very close.

"I forgot," he whispered, when the car started moving. "My father told me to call a taxi from the restaurant. We weren't supposed to walk outside like that."

I giggled. "I know. But, shh. We won't tell." It felt

good that Andrew didn't mind admitting he'd goofed something up. It was like we didn't have to put on an act or try to look perfect. I leaned toward him. Even through two layers of winter coats, I could feel how warm he was. And then his fingers curled around mine, a little damp and sweaty, but our hands didn't slip apart once in the whole bumpy ride back to the hotel.

Finally the cab stopped and the doorman helped us out of the car and into the lobby. Upstairs in the Dennises' apartment, the grown-ups were sitting around talking, the same as before we left. They smiled when we came in and asked if we had a good time.

"It was okay," Andrew answered. "Only Nicole tripped and her shoe broke." Everyone laughed and then went back to talking. Andrew sat down in a big easy chair, and I slid beside my mom on the couch. I guess it really doesn't show, I thought. How can it feel so different and look the same? I rubbed the palm of my hand where Andrew had held it. Maybe I imagined the whole thing, I thought suddenly. It could have been an accident, what happened in the cab. And in the ice-cream parlor, maybe he was only being polite. What if he doesn't ever write or talk to me again? I glanced up at Andrew, but he was shy now, with our parents around, and he looked at his knuckles instead of at me.

I shouldn't have worried. About a week later, after Andrew had gone back to California, a blue envelope came for me in the mail. I was so excited, I ripped a

corner off, hurrying to get it open. And what was inside turned out to be even better than I had dreamed.

> Dear Nicole, [he wrote] I miss you a lot. I wish you were here in California, so we could go together to do all the stuff I told you about. It would be a lot more fun that way. There isn't anybody here that I can really talk to, the way we talked at the ice-cream parlor. I think you're a very unusual person, Nicole, and I'm glad we became friends. I hope you don't forget about me. Please write.
>
> Love,
> Andrew

Love, Andrew. I stared at the words at the bottom of the page, and my hand shook. When you write "Love" like that at the end of a letter, does it really mean *love*? Or is it just an expression? Then I read the page over again—the part where he said he missed me, and where he told about how honestly we could talk. No, it is real, I thought. He feels exactly the same way I do. Because I love you, too, Andrew. I won't ever forget.

I wrote back. I told him about my school and my teachers, about Rhonda, and about the movies and books I liked. But most of all I told him how I felt—that was the important part. And when I got his letters, that was what I read first—where he said, "I love you, Nicole. I think of you all the time." It was our secret,

which no one else in the world knew, and just thinking of it would give me a warm, melty feeling down to my fingertips. I kept his letters with me everywhere I went—in my briefcase at school, in my dresser drawer at home—even under my pillow when I went to sleep. That way I could touch them anytime I wanted. It was the next best thing to having Andrew himself, warm and breathing, close beside me.

9

Those letters were a new beginning for me. Suddenly I had something wonderful, something that no one else had. That was a big change. But I didn't realize until later that one big change makes a thousand little ones. It wasn't only the things between Andrew and me that were different. My entire life was going topsy-turvy.

It was the first time I'd had a real secret—an important one. Keeping it from my mother wasn't too difficult, since I got home from school before my mom most of the time and I could grab Andrew's letters before she saw them. My parents thought we were writing to each other every couple of weeks, not almost every day. It felt funny, hiding it from my mother —she's okay, really, and I don't like to be sneaky— but it was necessary. This was a Secret. I didn't even tell Rhonda.

When I'd gone to school after Christmas break, Rhonda naturally asked me how the date went. And I told her, partly. She laughed when I described how

Andrew's glasses slid down his nose, and about the burning steak. But somehow I couldn't bring myself to tell her the good things. Like what happened later, when I fell down and we made up and laughed—or like when we rode together in the taxicab, holding hands. It was just too private to discuss, even with my best friend. If anyone in the world knew I felt that way, I'd just want to die.

Still, I worried a lot that it showed in spite of my trying to hide it. Being in love changes you, and sometimes I was sure it was written so plainly on my face that strangers passing in the street could see it. Thoughts would come into my head—all by themselves, I had nothing to do with it—and when I'd realize what I was thinking, I'd wonder if there was something wrong with me. Other people always looked so calm, I couldn't believe such things ever occurred to them.

I thought about boys. All kinds of boys—and men. I don't know why having one boyfriend should make me think so much about the other guys I saw around, but it did. I would look at them in school, or on the bus, or in the playground, and suddenly I would be watching them—their bodies, I mean—and I'd feel transparent. I even thought about Mr. Nathan that way. One day in the fall he'd worn a short-sleeved shirt to class, and when he lifted up his arm I could see black hairs underneath. Now I kept remembering that. Did Andrew have hairs under his arms? I would watch the boys playing ball in the yard after school, and I'd think, In the spring they'll wear short sleeves

again, and I'll be able to see. Then I'd think some more. They might not have hairs only under their arms. They might have hairs in other places. And what did they look like down there, anyway? My parents had bought me a book about that stuff a few years before, so I knew, sort of, what it was about. But reading it in some boring book and thinking about it for yourself are two different things. Sometimes I would get these ideas right in Mr. Nathan's class, and when I realized what I was doing, I wanted to drop down under the desk. Suppose he called on me and I blurted it out by mistake?

Thank goodness, that didn't happen. But I did have a close call with Mr. Nathan just the same. I had gone back to his classroom after school to drop off a late homework assignment. I'd been messing up my work and losing things all the time since my date—I figured it was another side effect of being in love. Anyway, Rhonda came to keep me company. Class had been dismissed, and the school was pretty quiet. In fact, it was creepy walking down the empty halls, and I almost lost my nerve.

"Maybe I should give it to him tomorrow," I suggested.

"Oh, come on. You've come this far, you might as well finish." So we walked down the corridor to Mr. Nathan's room.

The door was shut, but I peeked in and saw his coat on the desk.

"He's still here." I turned the doorknob and pushed

hard against the heavy door. It swung wide open. And there, in the back of the room, was Mr. Nathan with his arms around a woman, kissing her.

In my whole life I'd never seen anyone kiss like that, except in the movies. Mr. Nathan is big and dark, and next to this woman he looked enormous. He was bent partway over her, and her long blond hair dangled down in back. Their mouths were touching, so the sounds they made came out funny, but I guessed they were laughing. Then the woman gently pushed him back and straightened up.

"I think we have visitors, Sam," she said.

They slowly separated, and turned toward Rhonda and me. That's when I saw the woman was Miss Tobie, the English teacher I'd met my first day.

"So, girls," Mr. Nathan said, brushing off his jacket and pants, "what brings you back?"

He was pretty well mussed up. His hair was ruffled and even his clothes were kind of disarranged. Still, he went on talking as if nothing at all had happened . . . as if I hadn't even seen him do what he was doing.

"You know Miss Tobie, I expect," he went on. "Moira, this is Nicole Aldrich, and this is Rhonda Winkler. They're in my honors class."

Miss Tobie brushed the hair from her face and stretched out her hand. "Pleased to meet you both," she said.

Rhonda smiled and shook Miss Tobie's hand. She was so relaxed, it was as if she'd been invited in there. Of course, I was barely able to choke out hello. I

wished I could dry up into a little dust ball and roll away.

"Moira and I are engaged, you know," Mr. Nathan went on. "We're getting married in the spring. I hope you'll excuse our, uh, being swept away by passion. On school grounds like this . . ." Miss Tobie covered her mouth with her hand and looked at the floor.

"I'm sorry for barging in on you," I stammered. "I guess I'll go."

"No, no—don't leave, Nicole. You're already here, you must have come for a reason."

I swallowed. "I'm sorry. It's really dumb." I rummaged in my briefcase, found the assignment, and thrust it toward him.

"Oh yes, that homework you lost," he said. I stared at my feet, feeling like an idiot, interrupting him and Miss Tobie with something as babyish as homework.

"I didn't mean to disturb you," I said.

"Don't apologize. It's why I'm here. But next time, do try to hand it in on time."

I nodded and bowed my way out of the room, backward, bumping into things. When the door shut behind me, I turned and sprinted down the hall.

"Nicole! Wait up!" Rhonda shouted. "What's wrong with you, anyway?" I didn't even glance in her direction.

Near the main door of the lobby she finally caught up with me. "Nicole! What were you running like that for?"

I didn't answer. My face was hot and flushed, but I hoped she would think I was just out of breath.

"Why, Nicole," she said slowly, "you know, I believe you're embarrassed." I turned and headed for the exit. "You're embarrassed because you saw them kissing!"

"Will you be quiet!" My voice echoed in the lobby. Rhonda skipped after me, laughing.

"You are really funny," she said. "You're such a prude! I mean, so they were kissing. So what? I've seen my mother and her boyfriends do worse than that . . ."

I wanted to close my ears. She didn't understand it at all. But how could I tell her that when I saw Mr. Nathan and Miss Tobie kiss that way, I felt like it could have been me? I remembered Andrew beside me in the cab, how I'd felt the warmth of his body through the layers of winter clothes, and I could just imagine how it would be to stand with a boy so his whole body pressed against mine. The way they had been, so close, as if there was nothing between them. No. I didn't have to imagine. I *knew*. I knew how it would be, and I felt naked even thinking about it.

I hid my face and hurried toward the door. I couldn't breathe in that stuffy lobby. Rhonda, still laughing, ran after me into the cold outside air.

"Nicole!" she called. "Come on, wait up!" But I didn't stop. Finally she rushed up behind me and grabbed my sleeve.

"Nicole, what's the matter?" And then a slow smile

came over her face. "Oh, I bet I know what's eating you—why you've been acting so funny lately. I bet you're in love."

How could she possibly know that? I pulled free and scooted for the bus just as it was about to leave. I didn't dare look back. I knew I'd never be able to deny it, to lie right to her face. I was so frightened of being found out that for the next few days I didn't go near her. Sooner or later she's bound to forget, I told myself. But then little by little it dawned on me that I wasn't only frightened, I was angry. Angry at Rhonda.

It wasn't the last time. A week or so later, I got mad again, and I didn't keep it bottled inside, either. It happened while Rhonda and I were shopping at Dobkin's. She had invited me to come with her to buy pants, but on our way to the Juniors' Department, she stopped to look at the ladies' dresses and spent ages poking around the racks. Finally she picked out a sort of evening gown and held it up against her.

"What do you think?" she asked.

It was red—low-cut and slinky—the kind of thing Joan Collins might wear. Perhaps to L'Escargot Restaurant. And suddenly, as I stood looking at it, all the memories of that horrible date came flooding back. The unreadable menu. The flying mushroom. The flaming steak. But most of all, I remembered me and my ridiculous grown-up dress. The dress that Rhonda had helped me pick out. What an idiot I'd felt like, wearing that! Phony, and clumsy, and just plain dumb. That stupid outfit had almost ruined everything for

Andrew and me. And I hadn't realized until that moment how angry I was with Rhonda for getting me to wear it. I looked up at the dress she was holding.

"I hate it," I said.

She was so surprised she almost dropped the hanger.

"What?"

"You heard me. I hate it."

She slammed the dress back on the rack. She didn't know what to say—I'd never talked like this before.

"So what are you," she spluttered, "some kind of big authority all of a sudden?"

"I never said that, Rhonda, I just—" And then, all at once, I lost my nerve. She was right. I wasn't smart about clothes. If I was, I wouldn't have worn the dress in the first place. I took a quick step back and mumbled, looking at the floor.

"I just meant, well, you know, for me. It's not the kind of dress that I like for me."

Rhonda narrowed her eyes. Her fingers stroked the soft material.

"Well, at least you're beginning to understand your limitations," she said quietly. "Of course you couldn't wear a dress like this. You don't have the figure for it, or the style. Something like this would be wasted on you . . ."

I blinked hard, wrapping my arms tight around me. Who cares about the crummy old dress, I wanted to scream. I don't need the dress. My boyfriend doesn't care about junk like that. But the words dried up inside me. I didn't answer anything at all.

Later that night, in my room, when I had time to think things over, I felt really bad about what had happened between Rhonda and me. A month ago I would never have dreamed of such a thing—saying I hated a dress she picked. Criticizing Rhonda's taste was about the worst thing you could do to her. On the other hand, she hadn't acted like an angel, making me feel I wasn't good enough to wear fancy clothes. We both knew Rhonda was the one who was stylish and elegant. But she was also supposed to be my best friend, and best friends aren't supposed to care about how you look. After all, I'd never in my whole life looked stupider than when I tripped on the sidewalk outside L'Escargot. But Andrew had liked me anyway. And if he could, why couldn't she?

10

One morning in early March, Rhonda and I were sitting in assembly while Mr. Taylor, the principal, was reading off a long list of boring announcements. Suddenly he said something interesting.

"Mr. Milkis, our drama coach, has asked me to inform you that initial tryouts for the seventh-grade play, *Guys and Dolls*, are due to begin in two weeks. Songs from the show will be taught in all music classes, so anyone who wishes to audition will have the opportunity."

Rhonda leaned over, grabbed my arm, and squeezed so tight she nearly cut off my circulation.

"That's amazing! That's the most terrific thing! We did that play in elementary school and I got the main part! I know every song in the show."

"Are you going to try out this time?"

"What are you, crazy? Of course I'm going to try out!"

"I was only asking."

I had never seen Rhonda so excited. That afternoon

she took me home with her, chattering the whole way about the show. She told me all about her part, Sarah, the girl from the Save-A-Soul Mission, and the gambler, Sky Masterson, who she falls in love with. By the end of the bus ride, I felt like I knew *Guys and Dolls* better than the man who wrote it.

"And you know what this is?" she said, when we got to her house and up to her room. She dug in her closet and pulled out a funny-looking navy-blue dress with brass buttons.

"A meter-maid uniform?"

She screwed up her face like she'd bit a lemon. "Of course not, stupid. It's my costume. My costume for Sarah."

It seemed to me that with everybody learning the songs to the show in music class, Rhonda didn't have all that big an advantage over the rest of the seventh grade. But she had her heart set on playing the lead. She wriggled out of her own clothes and into the blue dress, and started to whirl around the room, singing.

" 'Ask me how do I feel . . . ask me now that we're cozy and clinging . . .' " She started off soft, then belted out the next part, " 'Well, sir, all I can say is if I were a bell I'd be ringing!' " I never knew she had such a good voice.

"You sound sensational!"

"Well, of course. You don't think they gave me the part for nothing, do you? Oh, but you should hear some of the other numbers . . . 'I'll know, when my love comes along . . . I'll know . . .' " She stopped

and took a deep breath, her cheeks bright pink. "I love that one, it's so romantic. You get to stand right next to Sky Masterson."

I hitched myself onto Rhonda's bed, leaning my back against the wall, and watched her twirl around the room. "Is it really fun, acting in a play?" I said at last.

"Oh, it's wonderful." She plumped next to me on the bed. "It's the most wonderful thing in the world. Standing there, with all the people looking at you, and wearing your special costume and makeup, and the lights—"

Just then there was a knock on the door, and Mrs. Winkler popped in her head. "I thought I heard singing up here. Rhonda, is that your old costume you have on?"

Rhonda jumped up. "They're doing it again, Mom. In the new school. They're doing *Guys and Dolls* for the seventh-grade play."

"Why, Rhon, that's terrific. With your experience, you should have a excellent shot at the lead."

"You think so?"

"Well"—Mrs. Winkler gave Rhonda a critical look—"you can never be sure of anything in show business. But there can't be too many girls in the seventh grade with your talent. Oh, you were so cute last time, in that outfit . . ."

Rhonda beamed. She wasn't behaving one bit like her usual cool and sophisticated self—in fact, she was getting incredibly soupy. But then I thought, Maybe

she's right. She'll probably get the best part and have a fabulous time. While I miss out on everything. My whole six years in elementary school, I didn't have the nerve to try out for one single play. What a chicken.

But later that night in my room I reconsidered. Then was then, I thought, and now is now. Sure I was afraid to go on stage in grade school. Back there everyone called me the Brain and laughed at me. But why should that happen this year? I'm doing okay at Deertrail. I'm friends with one of the most popular girls in school. And even if I'm not Miss America—I only want a part in the chorus. I ought to be able to sing well enough for that.

Besides, Andrew would really like it if I could act.

I sat down immediately and started to write. "My dearest darlingest Andrew," I began—I was pretty excited—"You'll never guess what's happening in my school." I told him about *Guys and Dolls*, and how Rhonda had been the star of that play once before and would almost positively get the part again. Then I paused, with my pen in midair. "What would you think," I wrote slowly, "if I decided to audition, too? Only for the chorus, naturally—I wouldn't expect to be a star or anything like that. I just thought it would be fun to participate, and learn about show business, like Rhonda and you."

And then I stopped again. I knew Andrew would like my being in the play—he'd been telling me for months to try acting. But what about Rhonda? Rhonda would be flabbergasted. She would never think I'd try

such a thing. What, Nicole Aldrich in a play? *Nicole?*

"Well, why not," I said out loud. Why shouldn't I have the same chance as other kids? And all at once I came to a decision. I won't even tell her what I'm going to do, I thought. When the audition comes, I'll just show up. Then she'll see. I'll knock her socks off.

The first round of tryouts was two weeks away—barely enough time for me to get ready. And I wanted to do a good job. I paid extra-careful attention in music class, so I'd learn the songs, and I picked out a nice outfit to wear on the big day. And Rhonda? Rhonda didn't suspect a thing. On the afternoon of the audition I waved goodbye and let her think I was on my way home. But I went to the girls' room instead, and spent the next ten minutes fixing my hair and straightening my clothes. I was getting a monster case of nerves.

How did real actors stand it, doing this every day? I looked in the mirror, saw the color of my lips, and wished I had a tube of Rhonda's lipstick. I tried to remind myself of all the good stuff Andrew had said in his letters. The play would be fun once it got started. I would do fine. All I had to do was relax and pretend I was singing in the shower. But to tell the truth, I was starting to feel sorry that I'd kept my plans from Rhonda. Suppose I got on stage and made an idiot of myself? If I'd told Rhonda, I'd at least have had some moral support. Now it was too late. The only other choice I had was to back out altogether, and I couldn't do that. So I fluffed my hair for the last time and headed down.

The auditorium was a zoo. There were loads of kids milling around—talking, standing, sitting. Up in front, Miss Wylie, the little gray-haired music teacher, was plinking notes on the piano. Mr. Milkis, who was in charge of organizing the whole thing, was sitting with his feet hanging over the edge of the stage, balancing an enormous pile of papers in his lap. He kept running his hands over the tufts of hair on the sides of his head, and from his expression it looked as if he wished he had some other job. Everyone was busy except me. I felt lost.

I hung back, leaning against the door, and searched up and down the rows for a glimpse of Rhonda's brown hair. All I wanted now was to find her and get my big surprise over with. Then I'd be able to relax and enjoy the play. That's what school activities were for—having fun. Timidly, I started down the aisle.

And then I spotted her, sitting up front at the far side of the room. She was facing away from me, but I recognized the long dark hair streaming down her back.

"Rhonda!" I called out. "Hey, Rhonda—it's me!" She turned at the sound of her name, and I smiled and waved furiously. But she didn't smile back. And when she twisted in her seat, I saw someone else I recognized right beside her. A short dumpy kid with the ugliest black curls all over her head.

11

"Oh, God," said Randy, as I came up to them. "What are you doing here?"

Just then Mr. Milkis rapped for attention. "Boys and girls, could you please find your seats—auditions are about to begin." I slipped into the closest empty spot—next to you-know-who, unfortunately. "Hi, Rhonda," I said, trying to pretend it was just the two of us.

"What are you doing here?" Randy said again.

"Trying out for the play, obviously," said Rhonda, turning to face me. "I didn't know you were coming to this, Nicole."

"Well, I sort of decided at the last minute. A kind of surprise. You know, so we could do it together."

"What exactly do you think you can do?" said Randy.

"For your information, I have a very good voice, and I'm here to try out for the play, same as you, you little truck." I knew it sounded funny, but I couldn't help it. That's what she always reminds me of, the way she zooms up on people.

"What did you call me?" she said, sticking her face into mine and breathing on me.

"Truck. I called you a truck."

"Oh yeah? Well, I'll . . ."

"Oh, will you both shut up? I have to concentrate. How can I stay calm for my audition with the two of you yakking?" We slowly sank back in our seats.

"Anyway," Rhonda went on, "Nicole has the same right to audition as anybody else. Everybody has the right to try, no matter how bad they are."

I almost groaned. She took it for granted I would get on stage and make an idiot of myself. But she was wrong. It wouldn't happen. I glanced sideways at Randy, who had stuck a rubber band around her teeth and was stretching it in and out with her thumb. At the very least, I thought, I'll be able to do better than *her*.

Mr. Milkis called the assembly to order and started to explain the procedure. First, he said, these were only preliminary tryouts, to see who was going to be allowed in the show at all. On Thursday they would post an alphabetical roster of the kids who passed, and only those kids would get to try out for the main parts in the final, big audition next week. Today, he said, he'd start with the boys. He would call them one by one to get on stage, read a few lines, and sing whatever song they wanted. After all the boys were through, the girls would do the same thing.

"How long does this take?" I whispered to Rhonda. It sounded like we might not finish before dinnertime.

"Until it's done."

I wrinkled my nose and watched the very first boy walk slowly toward the stage. "I think I'll start my homework." I reached for my briefcase and rustled my papers. Randy frowned.

"Study, study, study," she said. "If you're such a brain, how come you have to study all the time?"

It took only about two minutes for the auditions to get incredibly boring. The boys trooped up one after another and read their lines and sang. Mr. Milkis scribbled away in his notebook, still looking like he had an Excedrin headache. I was glad it was him making the decisions and not me—I thought they all sounded crummy. Most of them you couldn't even hear, except for the wise guys showing off. *Them* you wished you couldn't hear. It was so bad even homework seemed interesting by comparison.

I finished my math problems—they were easy—and leaned over my briefcase to find something else to do. Maybe English, I thought. But when I opened my notebook, I couldn't find my work. The papers were missing. I quickly riffled through the binder a second time.

"Oh no," I whispered.

"What is it?" Rhonda glared. She wanted to concentrate on the audition.

"My English assignment. It's lost. I can't find it."

"What assignment?"

"You know. The book report that we had to write for Miss Seifert. I was going to work on it some more."

Randy leaned over and tried to pull the papers off

my lap. "What's the matter, scatterbrain? Can't the class genius keep track of her homework?"

"Oh, she's always losing things," said Rhonda. "She can hardly remember her name and address anymore. I think she's in love."

In spite of myself I felt my face grow warm. Rhonda and her darned intuition. And did she have to announce it to the whole world?

"She can't remember her name, huh?" Randy leaned in close. "Well, that's just great. That's perfect." She yanked my book away and stuck her face right up against mine. "How are you going to act in a play, stupid, if you can't remember things? How are you going to learn your lines?"

"Oh, leave me alone," I said, pulling back. "You mind your own business and let me worry about myself."

"Huh," said Randy.

I was pretty shook up. Maybe losing the homework was a bad sign. I'd been so confident when I first got the idea to audition, but now the stage looked so big and empty and lonely. Probably I *would* make a fool of myself. But—I looked bitterly at Randy slouching in her seat—I couldn't quit. If I didn't get into this play, the two of them would be together here all spring, staying late every afternoon. They'd sit with each other in the cafeteria, talking shop, and I'd be out in the cold. No, I had to get up on that stage and somehow do at least as good a job as that loudmouth sitting next to me.

The minutes dragged on. Finally, after what seemed

like forever, they finished with the boys. And the first girl they called was Rhonda. Just from the way she walked down the aisle you could tell she would be great. She kept her head very straight, not looking to either side, and when she climbed the stairs to the stage, her heels echoed on the wooden floor. She bent close to Miss Wylie and told her what song she wanted to do, and when the music started, she faced the audience and sang out. Her voice was clear and beautiful—you could hear her all the way in the back of the room. And she didn't scream, either; the sound just naturally carried. She even smiled, like she didn't know what it was to be nervous.

"Gee, I wish I could sing like that," I whispered dreamily.

"Yeah, wish is right," snapped Randy. I had totally forgotten she was next to me.

When Rhonda got back, we both patted her on the shoulder and told her how great she sounded.

"Thanks." She slipped into her seat.

"You got the best part for sure," said Randy. But Rhonda turned sharply toward her, and the pink came into her cheeks.

"You don't know that," she said. "You can never tell until the end." She sat back stiffly, her arms crossed. Is she just being modest, I wondered. Or maybe it's bad luck to say it. But I had to admit, for once I agreed with Randy.

The list of names was in the order that kids had signed up. Since I'd waited till the last minute to write myself in, Randy was the next of the three of us. She

seemed to want to get her part over with quick. It was funny watching her clump to the stage on her short legs.

"She's gonna be too out of breath to sing," I whispered to Rhonda.

"Shh," she answered.

I guess deep down I'd been nervous about how Randy would do. But she turned out even worse than I thought. She sounded like a donkey in a barnyard. Without meaning to, I started to laugh.

"Will you be quiet," Rhonda said fiercely. "It's not fair to treat another performer that way." But I couldn't stop. I scrunched down in my seat, wiping my eyes with a tissue, while Rhonda poked me with her fist.

When Randy got back, Rhonda leaned over and told her she did great. How could she lie like that? I knew my eyes were still pink from laughing.

"Just wait till it's your turn, Brain," muttered Randy, giving me a really dirty look. "You'll see how funny it is." But I wasn't scared now. The booby prize had already been awarded.

After Randy there was a long, long wait while all the other girls in the auditorium tried out. The teachers looked tired, and a bunch of kids left for home.

"Aldrich," Mr. Milkis called out at last. "Nicole Aldrich!"

"Here!" I squeezed into the aisle as fast as I could. I swear Randy tripped me as I went past. All right, wise guy, I thought. I'll show you. Just sit tight and you'll see fireworks.

I tried to remember how Rhonda had gone up the

aisle—with her head high and her eyes straight forward. Don't look at anyone, I told myself, especially not Randy. She'd do anything to mess you up. And don't think, just do it. I walked on stage like a robot.

Rhonda had sung a piece of one of Sarah's songs—"I'll Know," which is very beautiful and romantic. I didn't want to risk doing that again. So after I did my reading, I told Miss Wylie to play "A Bushel and a Peck," a peppy number that Adelaide does with the Hot Box Girls. It's a funny part, which I thought might make it easier. I stepped to the center of the stage, and Miss Wylie played the intro. Where was my voice? And I couldn't remember the first words. Miss Wylie stopped, told me the opening line, and began again. And I guess that was when all my practicing paid off, because once I sang the first note, the rest of the song went by itself. The next thing I knew, Mr. Milkis was thanking me and asking me to step down.

"You mean I'm done?"

"Everyone's done. You were the last on the sheet—we're finished for the day. Okay, boys and girls, that's it! The call-back list will be posted on Thursday."

I stepped down from the stage. "Rhonda," I called out, but I didn't see her. Everyone was getting up to go, clattering their seats. I hadn't even gotten the chance to make a dignified exit. "Rhonda!" I called again, and hurried back to where we'd been sitting. But she was gone.

She didn't stay to congratulate me, I thought. Could I have stunk that bad? Maybe she didn't even want

to be seen with me in the hall. Well, that's what you get for trying to show off. You'll be lucky if Rhonda ever speaks to you again.

For the next two days I moped around, convinced that I'd messed up the audition, and everything else in my life. I didn't talk to Rhonda, and she didn't come looking for me. I figured I'd disgraced us both. So you can imagine how astonished I was on Thursday, when the list came out—with my name right at the top.

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"You see," I said to Rhonda, on Friday night, "it'll all work out. I've got the whole thing planned. On the days we don't have rehearsal we'll come home and practice. We can even work on our homework together."

"I don't need to do my homework with you," said Rhonda. "And as far as the show is concerned, what makes you think we'll have anything to practice together? Just because we'll both be in the same play doesn't mean we'll have the same parts to sing. *You'll* probably be in the chorus."

A few choice comments ran through my mind, like, Even the chorus is better than some people can do. But I kept my mouth shut. Rhonda was upset enough about Randy being cut. She kept talking about it like it was some kind of major world tragedy, although for the life of me I couldn't understand it. Randy was still going to be on the stage crew, hanging around all the time and making a nuisance of herself. And there was so much to feel good about. Rhonda and I

would be together in the show, and Rhonda was almost certain to get the main part. Still, whether it made sense or not, Rhonda was in the dumps. And her being depressed was making me depressed.

"Oh, let's go watch TV," she said at last.

It was Parent-Teacher night, and both our mothers were at school. Rhonda and I had the place to ourselves. It seemed rotten that with the whole night ahead of us, and no grown-ups, we couldn't think of anything better to do than watch TV.

We went to the den, switched the set on to *Dallas*, and stretched out on the floor. Rhonda got a bowl of Fritos, which is something she hardly ever eats, and started munching like she was hypnotized. She didn't say a word to me.

After about ten minutes, I couldn't stand it anymore. "Rhonda," I said, "how come you're acting this way? What did I do?" She stared at the set. "I'm sorry about Randy, if that's what it is. About her not getting in, and about laughing at her when she was auditioning. I know it wasn't nice. But look—she'll still be on the stage crew. You can see her there." I stopped and took a deep breath. Rhonda watched J.R.

"I didn't know you cared about Randy that much," I said.

At last she turned to face me. "Well, at least Randy is a friend. A friend who sticks by you."

"But I didn't know you wanted me to stick. And anyway, I *did* come to the rehearsal with you. I just didn't tell you ahead of time."

"That's not what I meant."

"And I sat with you, and told you how good you were. Not like—" I almost added, Not like when I auditioned and came back and you were gone. But I stopped myself just in time.

"Well, I am sorry about Randy," I finished. "That she didn't get into the play. But it wasn't my fault. And I'm sorry you don't believe me, about why I decided to try out." Because I'd only done it so we could be together, and have fun, and share it. But she didn't seem to understand that. She slumped back against the sofa and took another handful of corn chips.

"I think I'll do some homework," I said.

"What, again?"

"Well, I have a lot. I have that whole book report to do over, remember?" That was the one I had lost, that I'd found out about during the audition. I was trying to sort of put it back together from my notes, while it was still fresh in my mind. Rhonda leaned over and took a peek at it.

"Who writes notes for a book report?" she said.

"I do." I quickly gathered the papers together in a pile. "But that's all right, you don't have to work just because I am. Go ahead and watch your program." She sniffed and turned back to the TV.

At about nine-thirty, the front door creaked and Rhonda's mother came in. I bounced up to meet her in the hall.

"Hi, Mrs. Winkler." But instantly I saw there was

something wrong. She pushed right past me, barely giving me a glance.

"Nicole, your mother is waiting outside," she said.

I stepped back, bewildered. She seemed almost angry with me. But why? I couldn't figure out what was going on. I hesitated, then decided to follow her into the den, but the door slammed in my face. I had no choice but to leave.

I got my jacket from the closet and stepped outside. It felt weird, going without saying goodbye, but there was no one to say goodbye to. My mother's car was idling in the street in front of Rhonda's house.

"Hi, Mom," I said, walking around to the front seat and sliding in.

"Nicole," she answered. Her voice was chilly as an ice bath. Evidently Rhonda wasn't the only one in trouble.

The next thing I knew, I was sitting in the living room with my mother and father looming over me, getting the worst dressing down of my entire life.

"But, Nicole! How could you do such a thing? Such a sneaky, underhanded— If there's one thing I never thought about you, Nicole, it's that you would be devious."

Well, the long and short of it was that Mrs. Winkler had found out about the switched report cards while she was at the Parent-Teacher conference. She had said something to one of the teachers about Rhonda's grades slipping a bit lately, and the teacher had said that no, they were better than before. He showed them

to Mrs. Winkler in the book. She apologized and said she must have been mistaken. But later she had thought it over and figured out what we'd done. She had found my mother and told her, and now both of them were hopping mad.

"But, Mom," I wailed, for the umpteenth time, "I wasn't trying to cheat."

"What was it, then, an accident?" My father scowled and turned his back to me.

I gave my mother a desperate look. "You've got to understand. I mean, I know it wasn't right, but I was trying to help Rhonda. It wasn't like *I* got anything out of it."

My mother sank into a chair and rubbed her forehead. "Nicole, I know you *think* you acted entirely out of generosity. But maybe you need to do some soul-searching. You may have had reasons you don't like to admit, even to yourself. Anyway, even if your motives were faultless, Nicki, you have to realize that what you did was no help to Rhonda at all."

"Well, it would have been, if . . ."

"No, Nicki. It was not. It was not the action of a true friend. If you had really wanted to help Rhonda, you'd have offered to tutor her, you'd have spent time helping *her* to learn. You may have meant well, Nicki, but what you did was nothing but a cheap shortcut."

I started to cry. Of course I'd known that switching the cards was dishonest. I expected her to yell at me for that. But accusing me of not being Rhonda's friend, of not caring about her—that simply wasn't true. It was mean and rotten and unfair.

"What are you going to do?" I asked, swiping at my nose with a tissue.

"I don't know yet." She crossed her arms. "That is, I know what I would like to do, I'd like to have you inform the school authorities. But Mrs. Winkler doesn't want to bring the subject up. I think she feels it would count unfairly against Rhonda." My mother sighed and shook her head. Then she walked up to me and gently lifted my chin. "Nicki, you do understand that what you did was wrong?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"All right, then. Go to bed. It's late, and we're all tired. We can talk about it again in the morning."

But the morning came and my parents didn't mention the subject. At breakfast my mother gave me a thin smile, and then said she and Dad were going out for some groceries. She seemed satisfied that I realized my mistake. I went to my room and flopped on the bed, heaving a sigh of relief. Things could have turned out a lot worse. It was only then, as I lay there staring at the ceiling, that I thought of Rhonda and what her mother might have to say.

Anybody could see that in lots of ways Mrs. Winkler was absolutely terrific. She was gorgeous, of course, and stylish—much younger and more up-to-date than my mom. But she was also pretty strict. She wanted Rhonda to get A's. That was the reason we'd switched report cards in the first place. What would Mrs. Winkler do now that she'd found out that Rhonda was not only getting C's but lying about it? Suddenly I was convinced that Rhonda was in bad trouble.

While my parents were both out, I left a note on the kitchen table and got my bike from the garage and rode to Rhonda's house. It was about eleven when I got there, but the place looked still asleep—dark, and with the shades all drawn, as if someone had died.

I dumped my bike in the driveway and crunched up the white pebble walk to the front door. I was surprised, somehow, when Mrs. Winkler answered the bell. Usually she goes to the health club Saturday mornings. But of course this wasn't a usual morning.

"What do you want, Nicole?"

I'd never seen Mrs. Winkler look bad before. She was still in her housedress—no makeup, no hairdo—and the skin around her eyes was pinched and dry, like crinkled paper.

"I came to see Rhonda," I said softly.

She didn't move, not a flicker. "I don't wish Rhonda to see you," she said. "Not now, and not in the future. Not after what you've done."

"But I—" Then what she had said began to sink in. Not be allowed to see Rhonda? Not *ever*? My God, it was the worst punishment I could dream of. "But I want to explain . . ." I choked out.

Suddenly there came a rumbling sound from the stairs, and Rhonda pounded down in her bare feet.

"Don't you dare!" she screamed. "Don't you dare tell Jack. I hate him! I don't want you talking to your boyfriends about me!" Then she saw who it was.

"Nicole was just leaving," Mrs. Winkler said.

Rhonda must have spent the whole night crying.

She looked terrible. Her nose and eyes were red, her lips were swollen—even her hair was stringy and knotted.

"I only wanted to explain." Rhonda turned so I couldn't see her face. "Please," I said to her mother. "Please let me stay for a couple of minutes. Let me talk to Rhonda this once, and then I'll go away, I really will . . ."

Mrs. Winkler stared at me. Then, finally, she said, "Well, I expect you do owe her an apology. All right, come in." She swung open the door. "I'll give you five minutes. But then you have to go."

Rhonda turned, and I trudged up the stairs behind her. I was beginning to suspect that she felt the same way toward me as her mother. When she closed the door of her bedroom and faced me, her eyes were like a zombie's.

"So," she said, "what is it? What brilliant thing do you have to say now?"

"I don't have anything brilliant to say, Rhonda." I bit my lip. "I just came over because . . ."

"I know. You're sorry." She sat so hard on the bed that the pillows bounced. "And that's what you were dying to tell me."

Everything was coming out wrong. I opened my mouth to start over. But Rhonda wasn't finished yet.

"Yeah, I know all about it," she said. "You're so sorry. Sweet Nicole, always thinking of her friends. Well, Miss Considerate, why didn't you think of all this back then? Why didn't you think back then of

what would happen if we got caught? Well, I know why. Because you knew *you'd* never get in trouble. No one would ever think *you* were responsible. Oh no, not precious Nicole. Why would Nicole think of cheating? She's so smart, she would never have to do a thing like that. No, it must be that other girl that started it. That other stupid one." She began to cry, gulping her tears. "Who would ever believe that it was your idea?"

"But, Rhonda"—I couldn't believe my ears—"if that's all it is, I'll tell her. I'll tell her the truth."

"Oh yeah. You're so noble. Little Miss Perfect. Sure you can afford it, can't you. Tell me, what kind of punishment does Little Miss Perfect get?" She looked up, her nose red and dribbling.

"I . . ." I began, but my voice faded. I couldn't bear to say that my mother wasn't punishing me at all. But I didn't have to.

"Nothing! Right? Nothing. You're getting off scot-free, aren't you? And the whole thing was your idea in the first place." Rhonda jumped up and started to pace the room. "Do you know what my mother's doing to me? Do you?" She walked up close, stood so her face was an inch from mine. "She's making me quit the play. She's making me drop out, 'So you can spend more time on your studies.' I have to go in Monday and tell Mr. Milkis. I won't even get the chance to try out."

For a moment she stood frozen. Then she turned and walked away. I struggled to find my voice.

"Rhonda, would she do that to you? Make you quit the play? But she can't! Why, acting means everything to you. You were going to be Sarah . . ."

"Yeah. I *was* going to be, is right. She tells me, 'You'll appreciate it in the long run. Someday you'll thank me'—like she's doing me a big favor because she's not telling the school what we did. She thinks I should be grateful."

"Oh, I see . . ."

"No, you don't. You never see. Can't you understand, she's doing it for her? So no one at school will find out her darling daughter is a cheat." Rhonda turned in disgust and slumped back on the bed. "But one thing you can bet on, Nicole—she'd sure like to tell on you. The school would know about *you* already, except that it would get me in trouble. But as it is, I guess you're safe."

I didn't know what to say. Everything was awful, and there didn't seem to be any way to make it right.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I know it was really my fault. And I'll tell her, Rhonda, I'll tell anyone, if you want me to . . ." But Rhonda just waved her hand, like nothing mattered now, and sat hunched at the edge of the bed, her feet barely touching the floor.

"Rhonda." I glanced nervously at the door. My time was almost up, Mrs. Winkler would be calling for me in a minute. "Rhonda, I hoped—I really hoped you would understand. Even if no one else did. I really hoped you would realize that I only did it because . . ."

Because I loved you. But it was no use. I couldn't say the words. I hurried out, and over my shoulder, I saw her sitting there miserably still, her feet dangling over the edge of the bed. She didn't look up when I said goodbye.

How could things have turned out this badly? All day, until late that night, I thought about what had happened. Rhonda being forced to quit the play, and me not being allowed to see her anymore—her mother had thought of the worst punishments in the world for us. How would I ever *stand* it for Rhonda not to be my friend? If only there was some way to make things right again. But how? What could I possibly do?

I snuggled against my pillow and reached in my briefcase for the package of letters from Andrew. Sometimes reading them would make me feel better when nothing else could. I looked through the pile and pulled out the last letter he'd sent, the one I'd gotten a few days before.

Dear Nicole,
I'm really glad you decided to try out for the play at your school. I know you'll do great. You're really pretty and smart and I bet you have talent, too. Maybe someday we could be a show-biz team together??!!

But anyway, whatever happens, I love you and would still be your boyfriend even if you don't get in. You don't have to be a big star for me to

like you, but I'm sure you could be if you wanted to.

Love,
Andrew
P.S. I would kiss you if you weren't so far away.

I liked that letter a lot. Partly because of the thing about kissing, but mostly because it helped me remember how good I'd once felt about the play. It was funny, though—Andrew saying I could be an actress if I wanted. I'd never thought that about myself.

I smoothed the page and read it one more time. Then I thought, Suppose Andrew was right? Suppose I really could be a star? Wouldn't that make it just a tiny bit better—fairer—for me to still be in the play? Of course it was still terrible about Rhonda. But if I truly had talent—if I could do an extra, extra good job, maybe get a real part in the show—wouldn't it be like doing it for both of us? For Rhonda and me together?

For the first time since this awful mess had begun, I felt a glimmer of hope.

Monday morning I caught up with Rhonda outside school. I hurried behind her and shook her elbow. "Rhon!"

She turned around. Her face was pale and tired. "Nicole. You know I'm not supposed to talk to you."

"But you have to, for a minute."

"I can't."

"Rhonda, please." I looked quickly to both sides.

"Come on, your mother's not here, she won't know if we talk for two seconds. And it's important." I dropped my voice. "Rhonda—you're not mad at me just because your mother is, are you? I mean, I know what I did came out bad for you, but I wasn't trying to hurt you. You *know* I wouldn't want anything bad to happen to you, don't you?"

For a minute she didn't talk. "I guess so," she said at last. She tipped her head to one side. "So. What is it?"

"Okay." I took a step closer. "You see, Rhon, I had an idea. About the play."

"What?"

"Well, I know that you can't be in it now, that your mother won't let you. And I thought it was so unfair—for you to be excluded, I mean. Since you were the one with the talent. And I started thinking how if things were switched—if I were the one with the talent, I mean—well, it wouldn't be so bad."

"But you're not."

"No. Well, not really. But *if* I were. You see, I thought that maybe, if I could be better at acting, it wouldn't be quite so bad for me to be the one who stayed in."

She looked up suddenly. For the first time it dawned on me that she had expected me to say I was dropping out.

"You see," I went on quickly, "it's like I was saying I don't deserve it, to be in the play when you're not. But I thought, if I *could* deserve it, maybe do a half-

way-decent job—oh, you know what I mean, Rhonda. If I could do good, maybe get a real part, it would be, well, like for both of us. Sort of dedicated to you. Because you're my best friend."

All the color drained from Rhonda's face. But her eyes were glittering bright.

"Could you really do that?"

"I don't know. I don't know if I could. But I'd really try, for your sake."

"You're not good enough."

"But there's still a few days. I could practice. I could work hard."

Rhonda looked up. I couldn't tell if she wanted to laugh or cry. She opened the clasp on her pocketbook and rummaged inside for a tissue.

"Do you understand, Rhon?" I reached out and touched her arm.

"I understand perfectly."

"Don't cry."

"I'm not." And she wasn't. Her eyes were dark and clear and direct.

"You see—we're friends," I said softly. "No matter what, we're friends." And I smiled at her, even though I was almost crying myself.

13

For the next couple of days I was so nervous I didn't even write to Andrew. The homework piled up on my desk, and when teachers, or even my mother, asked me a question, I didn't hear what they said. All I could think of was the play, the final audition. I had to be good. I wasn't just doing it for myself now.

At long last, the day came. I walked down to the auditorium after school with my stomach fluttering and my hands clammy with sweat. The place was all noise and commotion—the piano playing in one corner, the stage crew shouting and banging in another. I walked down the aisle to the middle of the room and dropped my coat and books on a seat. Inside my briefcase, Andrew's letters were safely tucked away. They were my good-luck charm—I could almost feel them sending me a silent message: *You can do it, Nicole—I know you can.*

The letters were the only company I had. For the thousandth time I wished that Rhonda could have come—I felt so alone. But then, as I glanced in the

corner where the stage crew was working, I saw a familiar face. Not someone I was ordinarily happy to see, but this time was different. I leaned my backside against the edge of the seat and stretched for a better look. A little laugh rumbled inside me. She was already filthy dirty from moving furniture and opening cans of paint. Well, it was only right. Randy always ate like a pig—now she looked like one. It was such a wonderful sight, I forgot to be nervous.

I didn't actually decide to go over there. My feet just moved themselves. I left my stuff on the chair and sauntered down to the corner where she was working.

"Well," I said, coming up right behind her, "are you having fun with your fingerpaints?"

She jumped. She hadn't noticed me at all. But she made a quick recovery. "Oh, it's you. I almost forgot *you* were still here."

"Of course I'm here. I'm in the cast, remember? I don't have to get filthy and push furniture around, like some people."

Where was this nastiness coming from? I never talked this way—I sounded exactly like those kids that used to make fun of me in grade school. But wherever it was coming from, I couldn't stop it. It kept bubbling up, like when you unscrew the cap off a bottle of Pepsi.

Randy pretended not to notice. "If you'll excuse me, *please*," she said, "I have work to do." She started to walk off, lugging a can of paint, but I followed her.

"Oh yeah, real important work. Getting slopped up with green gook."

"It is important."

"It's secondary. What's really important is the acting, not the scenery. Nobody goes to a play to see the scenery."

Randy stood up straight and looked at me with shiny black eyes. "Is that so? Well. People would have had a lot better acting to see if *some*body hadn't ruined the star's chance to be in the play. If *some*body hadn't stopped the best actress from performing."

"What do you mean?"

"You know perfectly well what I mean. The play is gonna stink now, because you got Rhonda in trouble and kept her from being in it."

"I didn't!"

"Oh yes, you did. Rhonda told me herself. She told me you were the one who made her switch report cards."

It was ridiculous. I had only done that to help her. Besides, I hadn't *made* her do it—she wanted to. And how could I have known ahead of time when it would be discovered, or what kind of punishment her mother would give? The whole idea was idiotic.

"I . . . I . . ." I spluttered. I took a deep breath. "Even if I did switch the report cards," I said in a low voice, "I didn't do it for that reason. Back then we didn't even know about the play."

She stared at me. Then she came over, real close, and stuck her chin out. "Well, you know what I think? I think that if that hadn't worked, you'd have tried something different to get Rhonda out. You wanted

to play Sarah yourself. Once you got past the first audition, you got the idea you were good enough for anything. Except you knew you weren't really, you knew you didn't have a chance as long as Rhonda was still in the play. So you fixed it up so she would have to quit."

I took a step back. It was making me nauseous, the way Randy stuck her face right up against mine. And I couldn't believe she was saying this stuff. I felt like I'd been punched in the stomach.

"It's not true," I whispered. "You're just saying it because you're jealous. Because I'm in the play and you're not. You know it's all lies . . ."

"No. You're the one that's jealous. You were jealous of Rhonda. That's why you did it."

"No!"

"Yes. You purposely, deliberately messed her up, so you—"

"It's not true!" I shouted. "It's not true, and you know it. Rhonda's my friend. She understands perfectly about what went on. She's even gonna . . . she's even gonna come here herself, today, to be with me when I try out. That's the kind of friends we are, Rhonda and me."

Oh God, I thought. What am I saying? Rhonda never told me she would come. How could she? Her mother would kill her if she found out. I'd only said that because I wanted it so much. But then, out of the corner of my eye, way in the back of the room, I did see her. There was no mistaking her, with the blue

flowered jeans she'd worn that day and the long hair streaming down her back. It was a miracle—what I'd said to Randy had come true! Rhonda had come in spite of her mother. She'd come to help me—so I could get the part, for both of us.

"Rhonda," I murmured. And I took off down the aisle. "You'll never understand," I shouted to Randy as I ran. "You'll never understand what it's like between Rhonda and me. You'll never know in a million years what being friends really means."

I ran full tilt to the back of the room, jostling people and stepping on toes. But when I got there, Rhonda was gone. There wasn't a trace of her. Where could she have disappeared to? And why did she have to go? I shoved against the heavy door of the auditorium and looked both ways down the hall. It was empty. Suddenly I felt dizzy and confused. I couldn't have imagined it, could I? I had been positive it was her. I slid back inside, resting my shoulders on the cold metal. And then I understood. She came to help me, but when she saw Randy, she had to leave. Yes, that was it. She didn't dare come in or Randy would call Mrs. Winkler and tell.

I stumbled back to my seat. I'd been nervous from the moment I'd entered the auditorium, but now I was shaking all over, and my skin felt cold and sweaty. It's just because of Randy, I told myself. That's what she was trying to do, get you rattled, by saying all that mean stuff. Spoiling it so you couldn't sit with Rhonda. You can't let her see you like this. You can't give her the satisfaction.

"Just keep cool," I said out loud. "Keep cool and it will be all right." I edged along the row of seats to where I'd left my things, and sank down, wiping my hands on my coat. I had to get control of myself.

Then I remembered about Andrew's letters—my good-luck charm. All that encouraging stuff he'd said. Andrew thought I could do it, and he ought to know. I ruffled my hair. Maybe if I took them out for just a minute, held them in my hand. I leaned over, unfastened the clasp on my briefcase, and fumbled around inside. I had left them near the top. For a moment I groped blindly. Then I threw the briefcase wide open and stared inside. They were gone. My letters were gone.

I was sure I had brought them. I had double-checked this morning. How could they be missing? I shook the case, dumping everything out. The books and papers thudded onto the seat and slid to the floor. I clawed through them frantically, but there was no mistake. My letters, my precious letters were gone.

Suddenly I felt sick. The clamminess from my hands spread all over my body. I shivered, the room spun around, and the voices nearby spoke gibberish. I wanted to leave, to get up and run, but I felt too dizzy to move.

Then I heard Mr. Milkis calling for order. The audition was about to start. All around me kids ran and laughed and clattered their seats. Slowly the noise died down, even the banging of the stage crew and the soft chords of the piano. But my head still throbbed.

"Quiet, please. Quiet." Mr. Milkis rapped the table in front of him. "I'd like to get things underway."

Dimly I heard him talking, explaining. Go up on stage, get a copy of the play from the box. Read as instructed. How was I going to get through it? Even though I was sitting down, my legs were trembling. Whatever had made me think I could pull off a stunt like this?

Mr. Milkis began the audition. "Aileen? Aileen O'Leary?" Through my haze, I saw a girl hurry to the front and climb the stairs. She reached into the box for a book. And then she stood there, staring at the paper in her hand.

"Well?" said Mr. Milkis. Aileen giggled.

"I understand you may be nervous, Miss O'Leary," Mr. Milkis said, his voice rising, "but you're keeping everyone waiting."

"Oh . . . I'm sorry . . . it's just . . ."

"Do you want to read?"

"Yes, yes, I'm starting . . ." She took a deep breath and opened her book. But she couldn't get hold of herself. She kept blushing and laughing and coughing, all the way to the end. Mr. Milkis called another name.

By this time I felt too sick to pay much attention. The next girl, Jonine Siegel, from my class, ran up to the stage and got a book. And then it was weird. She acted just like Aileen—giggling and turning red. Finally Mr. Milkis lost his temper. There was noise in the back of the room, too, so he yelled at everyone.

"Miss Siegel! Don't you think you could at least *try* to keep your mind on your work? Or would you like me to dismiss you right now? And you . . . yes, you back there! Perhaps you'd like to stand up and tell

the entire assembly what is so uproariously funny?"

I had the strange sensation of things slipping away, like when a merry-go-round begins to turn. I was never going to make it through this afternoon. I knelt down to gather my papers and put them away. When I stood up, a shower of black dots fell in front of my eyes, and I had to grip the seat to keep my balance. Then I heard a voice.

"What's the matter, Nicole? You're not *leaving*, are you? Isn't this supposed to be your big chance?"

Randy was sitting behind me. She leaned forward in her chair, with her chin stuck out and her eyes squinting.

"Are you leaving before your audition? Why, you wouldn't want to do that, would you? And miss out on being a star?" She smiled like a dog showing its teeth. And suddenly I knew. Randy was the one. Randy had taken my letters while I'd been outside looking for Rhonda. And she'd done it for this exact reason—to mess me up, so I wouldn't be able to perform.

"I'm not leaving," I said. "I just got up to stretch my legs." She had seen me pick up my papers. She knew I had missed the letters, panicked, dumped everything on the floor. But I would die sooner than give her any more satisfaction. I sat carefully, still lightheaded and shivery. Randy had planned all this to make me quit. But I was going to finish if it killed me.

I sat like a block of ice, waiting, turned so Randy couldn't see my face. It seemed like eternity. But at last they called my name. I stood as straight as I could

and walked to the stage. Inside my head was a kind of steady hum that got louder and louder, so I didn't realize at first that there were real noises coming at me from the auditorium. I stiffly climbed the stairs and walked to the center of the platform. A million faces grinned at me. There were a few whistles, and a funny noise, like kissing.

"Quiet! I want quiet immediately. Miss Aldrich, will you please begin, page . . ." Mr. Milkis glared. "Didn't you pick up a copy of the script?" he snapped. "How do you expect to read without a script?"

I blinked stupidly. Then I remembered, and walked to the big box up front. It was labeled TAKE ONE. I reached down for a book.

And I saw them. The blue envelopes—my letters. Jumbled in there with the books, for everyone to see. Every kid who had gone up on stage had helped himself. Right now, in the back row of the auditorium, the boys were reading them and passing them around. Handling them. Someone had even scribbled on them with Magic Marker—red hearts all over the outside.

Kids were laughing out loud now. Whistles and hoots and squeaky kisses from every direction.

"I love you, Nicole! Nicole, my da-a-arling!"

The blood rushed hot to my face. I wanted to run down the steps of the stage, but my legs dissolved under me, so I had to sit and bump down, clutching each step for balance. When I reached the aisle, I ran. I tripped, but I got up and ran again, as fast as I could, until the door closed behind me. Kisses and shrieks of laughter followed me every step of the way.

14

My feet were very far away, at the other end of the world, and my fingers and lips were fat and swollen, like bananas, and when they touched something, it was like somebody else's fingers had touched it and then just told me about it. I was swimming under water, and everything was slow and distant. Voices bubbled to me from far away—weeds and mud kept tangling my legs. Then I would wake up, and it would only be my sweaty sheets, wrapped around me.

Later, I was awake in my parents' bed, watching *I Dream of Jeannie* on the TV, while my mother brushed my hair off my forehead with her cool hands. She brought me orange juice, and a soft-boiled egg to eat, but the runny yolk made me sick and I pushed it away.

"I'm awfully glad to see you awake, Nicki," she said. "You've been lying here three days with the flu. You had me frightened—the fever made you delirious half the time."

Delirious. What did that mean? Was that the weird,

slow, faraway feeling I had had? Did that mean it was all a dream? I stared up at the ceiling, my head still aching and little shimmers of light drifting and floating in front of me. But I knew that some of what I remembered was real.

I turned on my side and crunched myself into a ball, pulling the covers over me.

"Nicki," my mother whispered, "please try not to upset yourself. You're still sick. Put the unpleasant things out of your mind—when you feel better it will be easier."

But that only made it worse. I shook my head, clenching my fists over my ears. So she knew all about it. Everyone knew. Everyone in Deertrail Junior High—probably everyone in Pipertown, New Jersey—knew what had happened to me. And it was never going to get easier, not as long as I lived.

My mother was nice. I was home for days and days, and she missed a lot of work, taking care of me. One day a bunch of kids from my class came to visit—sort of an official committee, to check how I was. My mother knew I didn't want to see them, so she told them I still wasn't well enough for visitors. When she came back upstairs, she said it was up to me, she'd wait until I was ready. Only she didn't know that I would never be ready. Every time I thought about what had happened to me on stage, and pictured my letters being pawed over and read by strangers, I wanted to die. I never wanted to get well. I wanted to stay in bed forever—maybe get some terrible bone disease

that wouldn't let me walk or move or talk. Maybe then people would forget.

The next week I started to get well in spite of myself. My fever came down and my sore throat disappeared. My mother got me out of bed and propped me up with pillows on the couch. I sat there trembling. What would I do when she made me get dressed? When she made me get in the car and go back to Deertrail?

One afternoon my mother opened the door to my room. I was sitting on the bed, poking halfheartedly through some old magazines.

"There's someone here to see you," she said.

"But I . . ."

"I thought this was someone you wouldn't want to turn away." She opened the door and let me see Rhonda standing there.

"Oh," I said, feeling the color coming into my face.

It had been ages since I had seen her, and even longer since she had been to my house. I never liked her coming here, because it didn't seem good enough. And today, especially, I felt ashamed as I glanced down at my baggy pants and pajama top. But Rhonda walked in and smiled as if my room was her favorite spot on earth. She pulled up a wooden chair to face me.

"I heard you were sick," she said. "I'm sorry."

I struggled with my voice. "I'm getting better. My mother wants me to go back to school soon." She nodded. "How come you're here? Your mother . . ."

"She let me come when she found out you weren't feeling well."

I didn't know what to say to her. It was like talking to a stranger. She got up and walked back and forth nervously, between the window and the bookcase and the door.

"I've always liked your room," she said.

I stared at the daisy wallpaper, the green carpet, the row of Louisa May Alcott books, the old Raggedy Ann doll.

"Rhonda, you don't have to . . ."

"I *said* it was nice!" she snapped. "Why don't you ever believe me when I give you a compliment?"

I settled back against the pillow. Rhonda stared at me a moment, then walked to the window. It was raining, and she tapped the glass so the drops ran down.

"We all heard at school you were really sick. You've been out a long time."

"I had the flu, and a high fever. My mother said I was delirious. Actually, I was coming down with it . . . on the last day I went in." I couldn't say, on the day of the audition.

"Don't you have a lot of work to make up?"

I shrugged. "Mostly they excused me. Even Miss Seifert. Remember that book report? She finally decided to forget about it."

"Oh. Well, that was very nice of her."

"Yeah. People are really nice. Everyone wants to be nice—now." And I started to cry.

Rhonda had her back to me. She was looking out the window, twisting her finger in her hair. But when she heard me sniff, she turned around.

"Nicole, you shouldn't cry. Everyone at school feels terrible about what happened."

"Yeah, everyone. Everyone except the one who did it, and the ones who thought it was hysterically funny, and the ones who passed my letters around to their friends, and the . . ."

"Nicole!" I stopped. Rhonda went on quietly. "Mr. Taylor made an announcement in assembly. He said it was a disgrace for the whole school, and he asked whoever did it to come forward and . . ."

"He did *what*? He made an *announcement*? You mean he stood up in front of everyone and . . ."

"Nicole, he was only trying to catch the person responsible."

"Oh, Jeez. Oh, terrific. Listen, why didn't he just read the letters out loud? Or post them on the bulletin board, maybe? That way everyone could be absolutely sure which ones he meant."

"Nicole, you're acting like a baby."

"Well, you don't know!" I shouted, and then dropped my voice. "You don't know how it feels. To be . . . to be . . . hu . . . hu . . ." Humiliated. Embarrassed. Ashamed. I couldn't even choke out the words.

"Nicole, I don't think anybody really cares about it that much."

Somehow that remark didn't help. I wiped my face with a tissue and took a few shuddering breaths.

"Well, anyway," I said, after I got control of my voice, "I'm glad you came. I was afraid you'd never want to see me again."

"Why?" Then she added, "Anyway, how could I

not see you again? We do go to the same school, you know."

"I didn't mean that." She was turned so I couldn't see her face, but even so I looked at the wall. "I was just afraid, you know? That you would—after—that you'd be ashamed of me."

"And why would I do that?" She flicked a glance in my direction.

"Because—oh, Rhonda." I stuck my fingers in my hair. "I was afraid that you would be like the others and laugh. But I shouldn't have—I should have known that you were—are—too good . . ."

"I *wish* you wouldn't talk to me like that." She turned sharply and walked to the bookcase across the room. She picked up Raggedy Ann and poked at her painted eyes. "I hate it when you talk that way."

There was a soft knock on the door and my mother came in with a tray.

"I brought you girls a snack," she said, setting it down on the bed. She looked at us, from one to the other. "Is everything all right?" I nodded.

"Yes, thank you," Rhonda said, delicately taking a cookie. "Thank you very much for the refreshments."

"You're quite welcome, dear." My mother smiled broadly. "Well, girls, carry on, don't mind me." She closed the door behind her.

I took a quick glance at the cookies and set the tray on the floor. It had been ages since I wanted food. "Rhonda," I whispered, sitting up straight and pulling my legs under me. "Rhonda, about the letters."

"Oh, Nicole." She sighed. "Can't you forget it?"

"No. I can't. Besides, I have to talk to you about it. There's something— Rhonda, I think I know who did it."

"What?" She whirled around. "What did you say?"

"Yes." I leaned toward her. "Actually, I don't just think it, I know. I'm positive. And I had to tell you first thing, because, well—it was Randy."

Her cheeks flushed—white to pink to deep red. "How do you know that?"

I knotted my hands. "You see, I had to tell you," I went on quickly, "because since all this trouble with your mother, and you're not being allowed to see me—well, I know you've been friendly with Randy again. And I had to let you know, so you'd realize what kind of person she is, and be on your guard . . ."

"And how *do* you know?" said Rhonda. She circled carefully around my wooden chair and sat. "What makes you so sure it was her?"

"It had to be." I fumbled, losing track of what I wanted to say. "You see, we had an argument before the audition. About you. And Randy said all these terrible things about us, Rhonda. About our friendship. Like how I did it on purpose with the report cards, to get you in trouble so you'd be kicked out of the play. How I . . ." My heart was beating crazily. "Don't you see, don't you see the kind of person she is? That she could even think that stuff? Why, she could do anything at all."

"No, I don't see that."

"But, Rhonda, it's because she was jealous. Of you and me. Of our being best friends, and leaving her out . . ."

"Nicole, that's ridiculous. I couldn't even see you anymore."

"I know, but she wanted to get even for all the other times. And then—I sort of pushed her into it. I was pretty mean, I guess, in what I said. About how I got in the play and she didn't."

Rhonda lifted her chin, turned away. "But, Nicole. Don't you realize there were lots of people who could have been jealous of you? It was obvious you were one of the best ones there. Who knows how many kids might have wanted to trip you up?"

"But not—"

"Yes, Nicole. It could have been anyone. Anyone in the whole seventh grade. And I don't think it's very nice of you to suspect Randy. You just never liked her, that's all, because she's a little pushy sometimes. But she's basically a good kid."

"A good—Rhonda!" I jumped off the bed and walked up beside her. From the window at my back came the sound of wind and spattering rain. "Rhonda, I know you and Randy have been friends for ages, since elementary school, and you think you know her. But really, it's just that you're so good, you can't *imagine* doing something like that. So you think that Randy couldn't do it either. You don't know what it is to want to hurt someone that much." All I could see of Rhonda's face was her cheek, very pale, and the dark

hair falling against it. I went on in a low voice. "Besides, there's more to it than that. More evidence than just the letters. Rhonda, do you remember that homework I kept on losing? All those assignments and reports? Well, I didn't lose them. They were stolen. By Randy." My throat tightened. "Don't you see how it all fits in? That's how she knew the letters were there. She found them, going through my briefcase . . ."

Rhonda's face was absolutely white. "I don't believe it," she whispered.

"It's true."

"I don't . . ." She took a step back. "I don't believe it, Nicole!"

I was about to go on, to explain it all again, but when I saw her face I stopped. Her eyes were wide and dark, and her hair twisted across her throat and streaked down her shoulders.

"I don't believe what you're saying." She came a step closer. "All along, ever since I started being friends with Randy again, you've been looking for your chance to get even with her. I came here today thinking maybe we could make up and be friends again. But now I wouldn't be friends with you, Nicole, if you were the last person alive."

I couldn't breathe. There was no air. "Rhonda . . ." I started.

"No, let me finish." I stepped backward, toward the bed, knocking over the plate of cookies. They tumbled off and crunched beneath my foot.

"I was really stupid," Rhonda went on, "thinking

we could be friends again. But I wanted to and I tried, even after what you did to me. Letting me get in all the trouble, letting me get kicked out of the play. Still, I thought there might be something good about you. But I was wrong. I just couldn't believe you'd sink so low. You're the one who's jealous, Nicole. That's why you're accusing Randy. And you know what? You make me sick. You're always like that, always thinking rotten things about everyone else. You have a brain like a toilet, Nicole. Why should Randy steal your stuff? It doesn't make sense—she's not even in your class. What good is your homework to her? Accusing her is pure spite, that's all. Something only a toilet brain like you could invent."

I dropped onto the bed. Rhonda's face was an inch from mine. Her lips were foamy with saliva, and for a second I thought she was going to spit on me. But then she pulled away.

"Randy didn't steal your things, Nicole. You just made that up. You lost them. You lost them because you were so busy all the time, thinking about that . . . whatever his name is. That boyfriend of yours. The one you didn't even tell me about. Me, your supposedly best friend." My cheeks burned.

"Some friend you turned out to be," Rhonda went on. "But the kind of person you are, I don't think you could be friends with anyone. I don't think you know what friendship is."

She turned her back to me, walked to the mirror, and lightly brushed her fingers to her cheeks.

"Are you going?"

"What do you think?"

I opened my mouth, shut it. "Rhonda . . ."

"Nicole, just shut up." She threw open the door. "I don't want to hear anything anymore. I don't ever want to talk to you again. Not ever." Then she was out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

A few minutes later, my mother came.

"I heard loud voices."

"Rhonda . . . Rhonda and I had an argument. She doesn't want to be my friend anymore."

"Oh, Nicki." She touched my forehead. "Perhaps she'll cool off. She'll change her mind."

I shook my head. "No."

My mother sighed. "Then maybe it's for the best. A friend who kicks you when you're down, that's not much of a loss." For a moment she hesitated. "At any rate, there's still someone who cares about you." And in her hand she held out a blue envelope.

"Don't you even want it?" I didn't move. "All right," she said at last, and touched my cheek, and set the letter gently on the bed. Then she got up and tiptoed out of the room.

I picked up the envelope. That pretty blue, with the postmark *Beverly Hills*. Hollywood. Show biz. What a joke. If it hadn't been for Andrew and those stupid letters, none of this would have happened. Why couldn't I have seen right from the beginning that I was making an idiot of myself? I should have known I'd end up with people laughing at me. The paper trembled in

my hand, but I held it as steady as I could and ripped it down the middle. I took the halves and ripped those. Again and again, I tore it up, until the pieces were too small to shred, and nothing was left but a mess of blue confetti.

15

It was no surprise to anyone, when third-quarter report cards came out in the middle of April, that I was doing terribly in school. After all, I'd been busy, I'd been sick, I'd missed a lot of classes. Everyone said, "Nicki's grades will pick up again." But I knew better. Of all the things I didn't care about by that time, school was the one I didn't care about the most.

It had been horrible going back. No matter how people acted, I felt awful. Some kids still snickered when they thought I wasn't listening. Others hurried by, looking at their feet and making a wide circle around me, like they might catch some disease if they got too close. It didn't make a difference. Either way, I felt as if I were floating inside a bubble that no one else could enter. I was always alone—in class, in the halls, on the bus. But the worst time of all was lunch. I'd sit in the cafeteria at one of those long tables, with an island of empty chairs around me, while across the room Rhonda and Randy talked and laughed together. Then the bitterness would come up inside me.

She would rather have her for a friend than me, I'd think. A rotten sneaky cheat like Randy Huckaby.

By now I was positive that Randy had taken my stuff. I hadn't lost a thing since I got back, and that made sense. What would be the point of stealing, now that she had Rhonda to herself? Of course, I didn't have much homework *to* steal. I hardly did it anymore. So after a while, my teachers began to get upset with me—especially after the fourth marking period started and I didn't shape up.

They took turns bugging me—Miss Seifert, Mr. Maloney, all of them. "Nicole, I know you've had some difficult experiences recently, but don't you think it's time you pulled yourself together? You've got to start buckling down." Or, "Nicole, you are simply not functioning up to your potential. I don't want to fail you for the term, but that's what it will come to if you don't start making an effort." Well, fail me, I thought. See if I care. Things can't get any crummier, no matter what you do.

The only teacher that didn't get after me was Mr. Nathan. I always knew he was nice, but it wasn't until my troubles started that I appreciated *how* nice he was. He didn't give me lectures, or call on me when he saw I didn't know the answers. Sometimes I would catch him looking at me with such a kind expression it almost made me cry right there in class. Even though he didn't understand everything that was wrong, I could tell he had sympathy.

One day after school, I almost told him the whole story. He had dismissed the class, and the other kids

had hurried out to enjoy the spring weather. But I was still gathering my books. For a couple of minutes he stood quietly at his desk, fussing with his papers. Then he said, "Don't you want to go outside? It's a beautiful day."

I shrugged, shook my head, looked at the scrambled papers on my desk. Mr. Nathan put down his book and came over to sit on the edge of the desk next to me.

"Would you like to talk, Nicole?"

Instantly I was on the verge of tears. I shook my head furiously.

"You don't have anything to say?"

I shook my head again, dropping my papers.

"Here, let me help you." He leaned over and collected them. Then he murmured, "Actually, I have something to say to you. About that day last winter—when you came in on Moira and me. I'm afraid I handled it thoughtlessly."

I lowered my eyes and fiddled with the clasp on my briefcase. "It didn't bother me."

"No? I thought it did, a little. I thought perhaps I owed you an apology, or an explanation, at least."

"No."

"You see, it was only later I realized how it might have struck you, seeing us together like that. How deeply you must have felt it, since you yourself were in love."

In love. No other grown-up I knew would say that about someone my age.

"I don't mean to pry," he went on. "You don't have

to answer if you don't want to. But I felt I had to speak up, when I saw—" He paused, touched my elbow with his hand. "Nicole, you're making a terrible mistake. You're closing yourself off from your best feelings. I know you've been hurt, but what you're doing—the way you're pulling back from any hint of love or warmth— Nicole, you mustn't ever shut yourself off that way."

I jerked back my arm. What right did he have, I thought. What made him think he could poke into my personal affairs that way?

"You see," he said quickly, "that day, when you stumbled in on Moira and me— Nicole, do you know how I felt? Having one of my students discover me all flustered like that, right on the school property? Well, I'll tell you how I felt, Nicki—like a fool. I've never been more embarrassed in my life. So what did I do? I tried to cover it up. I bluffed and blustered, and in a way took it out on you, making you feel that somehow *you* had done something wrong. But you hadn't. Neither of us had. Oh, I could have found a more appropriate place, I'm sure. But, Nicki, love makes people vulnerable—sometimes it makes them downright silly. That's no reason to run away from it." I fixed my eyes on the desk, and scratched the inky gouges with my fingernails. I didn't dare look at his face.

"I can see you're tearing yourself apart over this," he said softly. "You're miserable. But it's partly your own doing. You won't let anyone help."

"No," I said suddenly. "No. No one wants me."

"What do you mean?" He rocked back on the desk. "That boy, Andrew—he doesn't like you anymore?"

"No," I said again. But it wasn't Andrew I'd been thinking of.

"Well, I'm sorry to hear that," he said gently. "But the best thing then is to put it behind you. Nicole—you mustn't throw away your other friends, everything else that makes you happy . . ."

I couldn't listen anymore. I shoved in my chair, picked up my books. "I have to go," I said.

"Nicki." Then he sighed. "All right."

But when I reached the door, he called me back. "Oh, Nicole. Before you leave, could you come here a moment? I have something for you."

I walked over. From one of the drawers he pulled out a cardboard box fastened with a rubber band, and held it out to me. I took it, and tried to pry open the lid. He touched my hand.

"It's your letters," he said. "As many as we could find. I've had them locked in here, waiting for the right time to give them back. I didn't read them," he added. "I just collected them. It seemed better than letting them kick around the school."

My eyes clouded, till all I could see of him was a dark blur towering over me. I blinked. His hands were hanging loose at his sides—waiting. If I cried, he would protect me. He was so strong, and so kind. I trembled, leaned toward him—but the moment passed. Because what did it matter? There was nothing he could do.

"Thank you," I whispered. "Thank you for everything." And I hurried out, the thud of the door echoing in the hall.

Mr. Nathan. How nice he was, how sweet and gentle, to tell me all those lies. But in the end, that's what they were. What had happened to me wasn't anything like being grown up and kissing your fiancée—no matter how much he wanted me to believe it. For him getting caught—well, maybe it was embarrassing. But for me? For me it was ridiculous. Nicole Aldrich, getting love letters—the idea was so idiotic, it was no wonder people had laughed. I couldn't understand myself how I had believed in it for so long.

But the humiliation wasn't the worst of it. The thing that really stung—the thing that made it hard to get out of bed in the morning—was what had happened between Rhonda and me. Oh, how I wished that what Mr. Nathan had said about my pulling away from my friends was true. But it wasn't like that. If I could walk up to Rhonda in the corridor and say, offhand, "Hey, want to come over after school today?"—then I wouldn't care if I were the laughingstock of the whole state of New Jersey. But it wasn't up to me. Rhonda hated me. She'd told me herself—I made her sick, she never wanted to speak to me again. And I knew it wasn't because of what I'd said about Randy. Again and again I'd gone over that conversation, trying to understand how it had happened, how it had suddenly changed direction and gone all terrible and wrong. Until at last I realized. Rhonda had made that happen.

She came to my house purposely to have that fight—to get rid of me. What I'd said about Randy had only been her excuse. The truth was—Rhonda was ashamed to be friends with me. I had cared about her more than anyone in the world, and now she didn't want me. That was a thousand times worse than being even the biggest fool.

16

April ended, May rolled around, and my life dragged miserably along. In fact, in some ways things got harder. May was the time for the school play, and posters for *Guys and Dolls—May 6, 7, & 8*—were plastered on every wall. The whole school—me especially—got reminded all over again of what had happened, and the snickering and giggling made me feel like a circus freak.

Then, to make matters worse, I got home one afternoon and found Mrs. Dennis sitting at our kitchen table.

"Hi, honey—you remember Andrew's mother, don't you?"

"Hello, dear," Mrs. Dennis said. She held out her hand and gave me one of those considerate smiles. Obviously my mother had spilled the whole story.

"Where's Andrew?" I stammered.

"Oh, he's still back in L.A. I've come by myself this time."

My mother explained that Mrs. Dennis had come to find a place for them to live. They were moving back East in a month or so, as soon as Andrew finished school.

"We won't be more than a half hour away," said Mrs. Dennis, as if that was something to be glad about.

So now I have her around, another reminder, I thought bitterly as I shut myself in my room. And in a month I'll have Andrew. I'll have to see him, sit in the same room with him—I can't shred him up like I can his letters.

The next day in school it was Miss Seifert's turn to bawl me out. She kept me ten minutes after class, during my lunch period, to complain about a book report I was supposed to have finished.

"Yes, Miss Seifert," I said. "I'll try to be more prompt."

"If you don't have it in by the end of the week, you're getting a zero. Do you understand, Nicole? I'm tired of your self-pity—it's about time you straightened yourself out."

Blah, blah, blah. I was so sick of the whole business, I wouldn't have cared if she'd hung me upside down by my toes. I slouched out to the hall and thought dismally of lunch. All by myself again at an empty table. Maybe I'll skip it, I decided. I'll spend the period in the bathroom—that's more my style. I walked down the hall to the girl's room, closed myself in a booth, and sat down with my clothes on. It wasn't so bad, actually—kind of a relief to be alone. But a minute

later the door opened and I heard a familiar click of heels.

"So what did your mother say? Did you explain it to her?"

"Oh, stupid! Don't do it like that. Here, give it to me." There were footsteps going toward the sink, and the snap of a pocketbook opening.

"You know, Randy, you ought to change your hair. It doesn't do anything for you."

"Oh, I know."

It was the two of them. Quickly I pulled my feet up so I'd be invisible. I was in no shape for a meeting.

There was some rustling and snapping. I pictured Rhonda—getting out her cosmetics kit, putting on some lip gloss and makeup—just a trace, for school days. I could almost see how lightly she touched the powder puff to her nose, and the shine of her lips with that transparent corally-pink color on them. Randy walked around behind her, close enough to the door of the toilet for me to see her shoes—horrible blue ones, with laces. Elephant feet. Why, oh why, was she allowed to be with Rhonda and not me? Why was she allowed to be her friend?

"Well, at least you won't have to be in that fatso Nathan's class if you get bumped. He doesn't teach the regular eighth grade, does he?"

He's not fat, I thought fiercely, my cheeks burning. He's wonderful, much too wonderful for an elephant brain like you to appreciate. But then it dawned on me what Randy was talking about. Bumped. Rhonda was getting bumped out of the honors program. Or

at least that's how it sounded. It hardly seemed possible. Rhonda had been doing so well.

There was a click of footsteps, and Rhonda walked into the compartment next to me. I could see her shoes—black low-heeled pumps, with lemon-yellow socks underneath.

"So what did your mom say?" Randy repeated. "When she saw the note?"

There was some noise while Rhonda did her business and flushed. But I thought I heard her answer, "She doesn't know."

"What?"

The door creaked. "She doesn't know," she repeated. "She didn't see the letter. I *took* the letter."

There was a moment's silence. "But doesn't she even suspect?" said Randy at last. "From the grades on your report cards? Your marks have been up and down like a yo-yo this year."

"Randy." Rhonda's bag snapped shut with a sound that was clear as an answer. I didn't know what Rhonda had done to keep her mother from seeing her true grades this time, but she had done something. I pushed myself farther back on the seat, and the metal handle of the toilet dug into my back. My legs were starting to tingle from being scrunched up so long.

"Anyway," Rhonda said, "all those report cards and grades are baby stuff. Same as that dumb play they're doing. I'm really glad now my mother made me quit. I would be embarrassed being involved with something like that."

So, I thought, as I rubbed my legs, now the play is

too babyish for her. And I guess what happened to me was babyish, too. Nothing matters—she can just push it all aside. Her schoolwork, the play—everything's beneath her. For a moment I wanted to march out of my hiding place and pop her one in the nose. But then I thought, No, Nicole, you're not angry, you're jealous. You just wish you could be the same way, walking around the school with yellow socks on, not caring what anyone said.

"You ready to go?" Rhonda asked, over the sound of running water. Randy was playing with the faucets, turning them on and off. *Plish, plish . . .*

"I guess," Randy said. The water gurgled. Then she added, "Ooh—I think . . . watching this water run makes me want to pee. I think I have to pee."

"Well, all right, then go. You don't have to make a public announcement."

The next thing I knew, there was a terrific bang against my door. Randy had run up, hooked her hands over the top, and bounced herself off by her feet.

"How about this one?" she said. "Look, it's locked and there's no one in it."

"That's probably because it's broken, stupid. It's out of order. It's probably full of P-U."

I watched, terrified, as Randy's fingers slipped off the top of my door. Oh, please, God, don't let her try it. Don't let her try this one . . .

"No, it's not broken," she said. "It would smell. Some kid just locked it and crawled out. They do it all the time."

"Randy . . ."

"I could crawl in from underneath."

"Randy, it's gross, lying on the floor like that . . ."

But it was too late. She was already wriggling in, and there was nothing I could do to stop her. I watched her slowly appear from below—first her black hair, then her ugly smushed-in face, and then, slowly, the rest of her, slithering in like a worm.

"Oh, God," she said, standing up. Then she called out, "Hey, Rhonda, you were right. This toilet *is* full of P-U." She slid open the latch and gave me a shove in the back. "Okay, stinko, get out. Look what I found, spying on us."

17

It's funny, but the first thing I thought, coming out of that toilet and seeing Rhonda standing there, with her hands on her hips and her eyes wide, was how pretty she looked up close. It had been so long since we were together. I had—how could I have?—forgotten how beautiful she was.

"Hi, Rhonda," I whispered.

She didn't answer. She got her brush from her pocketbook and began long quick strokes on her hair—one-two, one-two—watching herself in the mirror. Randy walked closer to me and poked her finger in my stomach.

"What a little skunk," she said. "What a rat." She shoved her face about a quarter of an inch from mine and breathed at me. "P-U," she said. "You stink, you stink like skunk." I wobbled back a step.

"Oh, cut it out, Randy," snapped Rhonda. "When are you going to quit all that idiotic kindergarten stuff?"

"Hmph." Randy made a face, but she backed off. "Well, what do you think we ought to do with her?"

she said, hoisting herself up to sit on the edge of one of the sinks. "The sneaky spy."

"Do with her? Why should we do anything with her?"

Randy jutted out her chin. "She was snooping," she said. "She was listening to our . . ."

"Oh, Randy," Rhonda looked me straight in the eye. "We didn't say anything important. And besides, Nicole would never rat. She isn't that type of person. Right?"

"Right," I said, soundlessly.

"*Rhonda!* Are you out of your mind? We are talking about *Nicole Aldrich* . . ."

"Yes," Rhonda replied. "We are. And I know her better than you do."

Randy groaned. Rhonda refastened her barrette. Then she came over to me, so close we almost touched shoulders.

"Well, Nicole," she murmured, "we haven't talked in the longest time. Ages. How have you been?" I nodded. "You're kind of pale," she said. "You ought to take better care of yourself." She opened her bag, got a little container of blush, and held it out to me.

"Oh, thank you. But I don't use that stuff."

"What's the matter?" said Randy. "Don't you want to be glamorous? Don't you have a *Ro*-meo anymore?" She hugged herself and made kissing noises with her lips.

I blinked a couple of times. "Thanks anyway," I said, pushing Rhonda's hand gently away.

Rhonda shrugged. "Well, it's up to you." She scanned

me head to toe. "But when I think of all the time I spent educating you . . ."

My cheeks warmed. I looked down at myself—it was true, my clothes were awful—and then back at Rhonda's face. I wanted to say something, but what? I couldn't figure out what she was doing. Had she forgotten that the last time we spoke she had called me a toilet brain?

"Jeez," said Randy. "What an idiot. She doesn't know what to say to you, Rhonda. The Brain's become such a retard, she's forgotten how to talk."

"You shouldn't say things like that."

"You shouldn't say things like that . . . oh, come on, Rhonda. I swear, sometimes you make me sick." Randy glared at both of us. "I mean, why are you wasting your time on this dodo? Standing there, making nice-nice." She grunted. "Besides, someone could come in any time and see you."

Rhonda tossed her head. She turned away from me and began to brush again, slowly this time. I could still see part of her face in the mirror.

"Randy, you don't understand," she said. "You're mad because you think Nicole was spying. But it's not like that. She wasn't trying to spy. How could she know we were coming here? And once she found out, well, she hung around because she was lonely. Isn't that right, Nicole?" I nodded. "You see, Nicki's been by herself so much lately. And I'm afraid"—she lifted her chin and glanced sharply in my direction—"I had a lot to do with that." I stopped breathing. My mouth

felt like it was filled with chalk dust. Rhonda went back to stroking her hair. "You see, I was very angry last time I was with her, and I said some very inconsiderate things. And Nicole is so sensitive. I think she might have overreacted."

"Oh, Jeez," said Randy.

"But the kind of person Nicole is, I know I can trust her not to hold a grudge. Right, Nicole?"

I nodded like a robot. I was totally bewildered. But what she said was true—I wouldn't do anything to hurt her.

For a second there was silence. Then Randy pushed herself off the sink. "This is making me sick," she said. "This is making me want to throw up. It's . . ." And she stopped short, and reached behind her. "Oh, gross," she said. "Look at this!" Rhonda exploded in a laugh, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. There was a giant wet spot on Randy's rear end, from where she had sat in a puddle on the sink.

"That is completely disgusting," said Rhonda, giggling. "It looks exactly like you-know-what . . ."

"Well, it's not as disgusting as the way you're acting with her!" Randy shouted. She stomped away from us and got her books off the floor. "I'll wait for you in the hall," she said, "your Majesty." She flung the door wide and stormed out.

Rhonda had to press her lips tight to stop giggling. "Randy has no sense of humor," she said. "All she knows how to do is get mad."

She put away her brush and leaned in toward the

mirror, touching her finger to her nose. "Well," she said. "I guess it's time for me to go." She knelt down to gather her things.

But I couldn't stand to watch her leave. "Rhonda," I blurted out. She glanced up. "Did you really mean it, what you said? About—"

"About what, Nicole?"

"About your not still being mad at me?" I fumbled, bit my lip. "Because I wouldn't do it, anyway. I mean, I wouldn't ever tell anything on anyone. Not even if they didn't like me. But if you did, I mean, if you could—"

"I'm not mad, Nicole," she said easily.

I took a deep breath. It felt like the first air I'd had in weeks.

"I was stupid, the way I acted last time." Rhonda smiled, showing her perfect white teeth. "So why don't we forget it, okay? Listen, if you feel like it—you could even give me a call sometime." Then, before the words had a chance to sink in, she walked away, her heels clicking on the tile floor.

Give me a call. Give me a call sometime. I could hardly believe my ears. But did she really mean it?

Two days later, I decided to find out. It was Thursday, opening night for *Guys and Dolls*, and across town at Deertrail auditorium the orchestra was striking up the overture. I was alone in my room. Oh, I thought, if only things had gone differently. I wouldn't be sitting here. I'd be on stage, dressed in a costume—as one of the officers in the Save-A-Soul Mission, or

as a Hot Box Girl. And Rhonda would be Sarah. We'd be together now, biting our nails and giggling, peeking at the audience from behind the edge of the curtain. But everything had gone wrong. I *was* in my room by myself. And Rhonda—well, her bedroom was prettier than mine, but she was probably just as lonely.

How could it have ended this way? I pushed myself off the bed and went to the mirror. I stared at my reflection, trying to imagine myself as a Hot Box Girl. Wearing a little bathing-suit thing, with glitter on it, and tights. Maybe pink or emerald-green. And high-heeled shoes . . . I took a step backward, so I could kick without hitting my dresser. Then I saw myself in the mirror, full-length, and the breath caught in my throat.

I was thin. My blouse hung off me, flapping like wash on a clothesline. My hair was a frizzy tangle. And my face! Was that really me? White and flabby—except for the purple blotches under the eyes. How could I have ever thought . . . how could I have *dreamed* of being a Hot Box Girl? I was so ugly, so horrible—I deserved my fate. Anyone as ugly as me deserved all the bad luck in the world.

And then, as clear as if she'd been in the room with me, I saw Rhonda. Beautiful Rhonda—with her smooth skin and delicate fingers and shiny long brown hair. She had suffered as much—no, more—than me. But it hadn't touched her. She had glided through it, proud and graceful as a swan.

"Oh, Rhonda!" I cried out loud. "I'm so lonely."

I flushed. You're being ridiculous, I said to myself. Just look at you. No one, *no one*, could want you the way you are. Especially not Rhonda. Especially not someone as perfect as her.

But she had offered. She had *said*. And in the end, my loneliness won out. I opened the door of my room and crept downstairs to the phone. My hands were so slippery I could hardly hold the receiver. But I forced myself to dial. The phone rang—once, twice. And she picked up.

"Rhonda? It's me, Nicole."

There was a pause. Then, "Oh, hi."

"You're home," I said. "You're not at the play." I jammed my fist between my eyes. Obviously she was home. Did I have to rub it in that we were the only kids in the school not going to opening night? But she wasn't ruffled.

"No, I didn't go," she said. "I'm not interested. Once I quit, I put the whole thing out of my mind."

Yes—that was it, exactly. She was sailing through, just like I thought. Like I wished I could do . . .

"Rhonda." I hesitated. "About what you said the other morning, about not being mad"—I swallowed hard—"do you think, if your mother wouldn't mind, do you think we could—" I broke off. The silence hummed in my ear. But then she spoke, so calm, so easy.

"Sure," she said. "I could probably fix it up. I mean—you want to come to my house, right? Be friends again."

I can't believe it, I thought. She means it, she really means it . . .

"Let me check my calendar." Papers rustled. "It can't be this weekend, I'm busy. But maybe—how about Wednesday? Do you want to come Wednesday?"

Wednesday. My mind raced ahead—we'd meet after school, sit on the bus, side by side. I wouldn't have to be alone.

"Nicole, do you want to come or not?"

"Yes, yes, I do."

"All right, then. I'll see you in school." She hung up.

I set the telephone back in place, feeling dizzy and light and free, and floated up the stairs to my room. I threw open the window, and spring air smelling of flowers blew softly in. My body felt as feathery as a dandelion wisp. I almost believed I could sail away on a breeze.

"I'm okay now," I said out loud. "Everything is going to be okay."

Because suddenly life seemed possible again. All the things I hadn't had the strength to think about yesterday, now they'd be as easy as breathing. I'd fix up my clothes, start to dress decently, and I'd wash my hair, maybe get a new stylish cut. I wouldn't have to drag myself out of bed each morning—I'd get up happy, the way I used to. And at school, at school things would come around, too. I would . . .

I sat bolt upright. School. With all this dreaming of how things were going to be, I'd forgotten Miss Seifert. Miss Seifert and her stupid book report. The one that was due tomorrow. The one I was going to get a zero

for if I didn't hand it in. It was so unfair. There was no way I could do it overnight, and another bad mark and I'd probably flunk the whole period. Why did I have to get a zero now—just when I'd decided to turn over a new leaf?

But then something tickled the back of my mind. Maybe I didn't have to flunk the term. Because I already had a book report. The one that had been lost, or rather, stolen. I'd redone it, but I'd never handed it in. I'd gotten sick instead. Now, if I could only find it . . .

I jumped up and bounded to my desk. Could I possibly have thrown it out? Desperate, I yanked open the drawers and pawed through the piles of paper. Loose-leaf binders and index cards tumbled on the floor. But at last I found it, under a stack of quizzes and graded homework. It was crumpled and smudged and crossed out. But it was clear enough to read. All I had to do was recopy it and hand it in. I pushed the junk on my desk to one side and sat down to work.

18

It was the best weekend I'd had in as long as I could remember. For me, spring had finally come. I spent some time on my homework, so for the first time in weeks I had my assignments completed by Monday morning. I found a nice pair of slacks and a cute top to wear to school, and I washed and brushed my hair. At breakfast I was so hungry I ate two eggs and orange juice and toast. And on the bus, someone actually sat next to me. We didn't talk, but still . . .

I hope Rhonda notices, I thought, when I got into homeroom. Then I can wave. But Rhonda wasn't around, so I smiled at Mr. Nathan instead. He didn't smile back. He gave me a kind of sickly-sweet expression, and then motioned me over with his hand.

"You look lovely this morning, Nicki," he said. "Do you have something special planned?"

"No, I just decided to dress up a little. For spring." I wanted to show him that things were all better.

"Yes. Well"—that uneasy expression came over him again—"Nicki, I'm sorry to do this when you're in

such good spirits, but I'm afraid there's trouble. I got a note from the principal this morning, and it doesn't sound good." He held out a slip of paper in his fingers. "Mr. Taylor wants to see you in his office, first thing. They're trying to reach your mother, too."

"Why are you looking at me like that?" I shoved away his hand. "I don't have any idea what it's about."

"Nicki, I wasn't accusing you. In fact, I'm going to try and get away, to join you. It sounds as if you might need a friend."

I nodded dumbly. He wrote me out a pass and I headed through the empty hallways to Mr. Taylor's office. What could I have done? I racked my brains until my head ached, but I simply couldn't imagine.

"They're all waiting," the secretary said when I came in. "Right through here. Oh, and Nicole"—I turned around—"we've been trying and trying to reach your mother, but she doesn't answer. Do you know where she might be? It's very important."

"Did you try her number at school?" I said, choking down the lump in my throat. "She works."

The secretary riffled through her papers. "Oh yes, here it is. I missed it. All right, go ahead in."

I didn't want to go, but I could feel the secretary's eyes glaring at my back. I had to do what she said. So I swung the door open. Inside the room were four people—Mr. Taylor, Miss Seifert, Mrs. Winkler, and Rhonda—and they all turned to look at me.

"Good morning, Nicole," Mr. Taylor said. "Would you please come in and take a seat?"

I inched forward and edged into the chair he pointed at. For a moment we all sat there in silence. Then Mr. Taylor cleared his throat. His Adam's apple bounced up and down a few times.

"Miss Seifert called me at home this weekend. She was very upset over something you did, Nicole."

I glanced at Miss Seifert, but she was busy tapping her wristwatch.

"What?" I said.

"The nerve of that girl! Why, butter wouldn't melt in her mouth." I blinked at Mrs. Winkler in surprise.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I mumbled.

"Oh, Nicole, stop playing around," said Miss Seifert sharply. "I've told you time and time again. We're all sorry for what happened to you, and for all the emotional problems you've had this year. But this time you've simply gone too far." She scowled, and from somewhere pulled out a paper and shook it under my nose.

"This report!" she shouted. "You copied this report! And that's something you simply can't get away with."

A slow flush of guilt crept over me. What had I done? That paper she was holding out—it was my book report, the one I'd handed in on Friday. And I had copied it—copied it over, that is. But why was she so mad about it?

"I had to copy it. It was old, and kind of dirty and creased." I glanced from face to face. "I'm sorry. I

would have done a new one, but it was Thursday and I didn't have time, and you were going to give me a zero if I didn't hand it in."

"Yes, I did tell you to have a book report by Friday. But it was supposed to be your own! Need I say, Nicole, that it doesn't count if you hand in someone else's?"

I dropped back in the chair. "I don't understand."

Mr. Taylor spoke quite softly. "Nicole, it appears that this exact report was handed in some weeks ago by Rhonda Winkler."

I looked at Rhonda. She was rubbing the pink polish on her fingernails.

"But it couldn't have been!"

Miss Seifert broke in. "It was the same report. Rhonda handed it in two months ago. And you handed it in on Friday." She lowered her voice. "Do you take me for some kind of fool?"

I rubbed my forehead. My brain was numb. How could Rhonda have handed in the same report? It didn't make sense.

"Maybe," Rhonda piped up, "someone stole it from my desk and put it in Nicki's briefcase. Like a prank. So she didn't know what she was handing in." She looked around hopefully. "After all, there is a thief in the school."

"That's no excuse," Miss Seifert said. "If Nicole didn't do the work herself, what does it matter whose it is?"

"But I did do it myself! That report was mine!" I insisted.

"I see," Mrs. Winkler snapped. "You wrote it yourself. And I suppose my daughter took it from you two months *before* you wrote it." She turned to Mr. Taylor and Miss Seifert. "This is simply ridiculous. It's absurd. Why, the entire school knows Nicole is a failing student. She was about to receive a zero in English. Isn't it plain enough to you people that this girl stole my daughter's work? It's clear as day what's gone on here. And what I want to know is, what's going to be done about it?"

Then I heard a familiar voice. "Nicole wasn't always a failing student, Mrs. Winkler. In fact, for much of the term, Nicole's grades were better than Rhonda's."

Everyone turned toward the door. Mr. Nathan gave a polite bow. "I'm sorry to barge in, Mr. Taylor," he murmured. "But I thought I might be able to shed a little light. I know both girls very well."

Mrs. Winkler muttered under her breath. But Mr. Taylor nodded. "Yes, all right." He pointed to an empty chair, and Mr. Nathan pulled it next to me.

"Thanks," Mr. Nathan said. "I didn't mean to interrupt, but I did feel compelled to point that out. Rhonda's grades have fluctuated a great deal this term. While Nicole, until her recent problems, was a straight-A student."

"Which makes it even worse that she would stoop to theft," said Miss Seifert quietly.

But I hadn't stolen anything. I knew that. In fact, someone had stolen a whole lot of stuff from me.

Slowly, the wheels in my head began to turn. What was it Mr. Nathan had said about Rhonda's grades going up and down? Could that have anything to do with me? I looked up at Mr. Nathan's face. He gave me a silent nod. Yes. Yes! All the pieces fit. When Rhonda's grades had been good, when they'd been bad. And most important, when my homework had disappeared. I had been so positive that Randy was the one, so sure she had taken my work out of meanness and spite. But there was another explanation, one that I should have seen months ago. One that would have been obvious if I hadn't been so convinced, so absolutely certain, that Rhonda Winkler would never do anything wrong.

Mr. Taylor cleared his throat. "To fill you in, Mr. Nathan—just before you came in, Rhonda here suggested another possible solution for what took place—uh, something about a theft. Although I think she may have been more interested in helping her friend than in getting to the bottom of things. Very kind and all, but—"

"Rhonda's idea may not be so far off the mark," Mr. Nathan said. "After all, it is an established fact that there's a thief in the school."

"There's a thief, all right. Sitting right there!" Mrs. Winkler pointed at me.

"I'm sorry. In the incident I had in mind, Nicole was the victim, not the perpetrator."

"You're referring to . . ."

"Yes. Nicole's letters." Mr. Nathan tapped his fin-

gernail to his teeth. "I assume no one is suggesting that she took those herself."

"No, no, of course not."

"So . . ."

"So what?" Miss Seifert interrupted. "I still don't see what you're driving at, Sam. What happened to Nicole was very unfortunate, and as I said before, we all feel sorry for her. But it doesn't excuse her cheating. And frankly, I don't see why you're bringing it up. It's ancient history." She folded her arms across her chest. "As a matter of fact, I don't understand you at all. Why, you were the one who told me, months ago, that you suspected something funny going on. That Nicole had handed in some homework that was suspiciously similar to Rhonda's. And now, when she turns in a report that's nearly word-for-word identical—I don't see what else you can think, really I don't."

"Why not? It's simple enough . . ."

But before he could finish his sentence, I reached out and clutched his arm. It was going too fast—whizzing by before I could catch hold of it. For months she had been taking my work and handing it in. It was only a miracle I hadn't been caught before. And Mr. Nathan had known. He had figured it all out, and realized that just because she turned her work in first, it didn't mean that I was the one who had copied. He had understood everything, but he hadn't said a word to me. He had been protecting me. There was only one thief in Deertrail Junior High—and homework wasn't the only thing she had stolen.

I raised my eyes. Rhonda was sitting with her long brown hair falling in front of her face, hiding. She knew that at last I'd discovered the truth. And she was afraid that I'd tell.

"Well, Nicole," Mr. Taylor said, rather gently, "I think it rests with you. Do you have anything to say to clear this up? Any explanation to offer?"

Then Rhonda pushed her hair away and lifted her face. Her eyes were dark and cold. How could I have trusted her? How could we ever have been friends? But my throat tightened—the words wouldn't come. I had promised, and I would never give her away. No matter what she had done.

I faced Mr. Taylor. "No," I said. "I can't explain it. I don't know how it happened. I don't have anything to say."

"She's lying!" Mrs. Winkler's voice shook. "She's lying through her teeth. You should make her confess. The girl is totally untrustworthy!" She was thinking of the time when I'd switched the report cards. That's what she wanted to talk about—to prove to them how dishonest I was. But she couldn't, because of how it would look for Rhonda. She doesn't know, I thought suddenly. She doesn't realize that Rhonda is more dishonest than me.

"Please calm down, Mrs. Winkler," Mr. Taylor said. "This isn't the Spanish Inquisition. Rest assured we will deal with Nicole as she deserves." He turned to me again. "Is that all you have to say, Nicole?" I nodded. "Very well. I'm afraid you leave us no alter-

native. Especially"—he tilted his head toward Mr. Nathan—"since this isn't the first offense."

Mr. Nathan was almost trembling with anger. I knew he wanted to speak, but I shook my head. No. I'd been helpless long enough. I was going to handle this my own way. Even so, Mr. Nathan leaned forward.

"I think we should at least keep in mind all that Nicki's been through this year," he said. "She's been very unhappy. Perhaps some counseling is in order."

"Well, perhaps," Mr. Taylor said. "Nevertheless, we can't ignore the incident." He paused, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. "I think—two days' suspension for you, Nicki. And—don't you agree, Miss Seifert?—a failing mark for the term, with the year's grade affected accordingly."

I barely listened. Around and around in my head it went. How, *how* could she have done this to me?

They showed us out to the front office, where the secretary sat. At that moment my mother hurried in, unbuttoning her sweater.

"I came as fast as I could. What . . ."

"Oh, Mommy," I said, and buried my face in her sleeve.

"What's going on here?" she said, twisting from side to side. "Nicki, are you all right? Will someone please tell me—"

So Mr. Taylor took her aside, and went over it once more. While he was talking, Rhonda and her mother

bustled off, arm in arm, into the hall. For once, I didn't envy either of them.

My mother didn't say a word to Mr. Taylor. She kept her arm tight around me as she listened. When he finished, she hugged me, and we turned together and walked silently to the car. She started the engine. Then she asked softly, "Is that how it happened?"

I shook my head. And I told her the truth.

"But, Nicki! You can't let her do that to you!"

"Please, Mom," I said. "Don't tell. I need to work it out for myself. I need to understand . . . why."

She didn't argue. She reached across, took my hand, and squeezed with all her might. I nodded. Then I leaned against the headrest, shut my eyes, and thought.

19

Early Saturday morning, before anyone else was up, I got dressed and went outside to sit on the front steps and breathe the fresh air. It had been a tough week. When I got back from suspension, I found that the whole school knew—or thought they knew—I was a cheat. No one would say two words to me, unless the words were "sneaky rat." I was by myself again, on the bus and in the cafeteria. But somehow, this time, being on the outs wasn't so hard. I was getting used to having troubles, and to not caring that much what other people thought. After all, I knew the truth.

For a few minutes I sat in the sun and let the warm breeze tickle my nose. But I'd gotten up early that day for a reason. I was going to see Rhonda and talk to her one final time. All week I'd been puzzling over what she had done to me. Some of it, like stealing my homework, I could understand. But no matter how I tried, when it came to the letters I stopped short. Why had she taken them? Why had she wanted to hurt me

so much? I had to know. And the only way was to hear it from her own lips.

I set off down the street. Rhonda's block was quiet, the shades on her house were shut tight. But I marched up and rang the bell. After a long wait, Mrs. Winkler came to the door. She was wearing a gray sweat suit and combing the hair back from her forehead. When she saw me, her eyes got narrow and all the little lines on her face crinkled up.

"What exactly do you think you're doing here?"

"I have to see Rhonda," I said, and licked my lips. "This is the last time. But I'm going to see her now. Even if I have to wait all day."

"You have real gall, missy . . . do you know that?"

"I'm not going to do anything to her. But I have to talk to her. And if you don't let me, I'll just sit here."

"I'm calling your mother," she said, turning on her heel. But she left the door a crack open, so I stepped inside.

The house was as white and bright as ever, and still beautiful, I suppose—but not to me. All that sparkle gave me a chill, and I was grateful I didn't have to live there. I could already hear Mrs. Winkler dialing the phone, so I hurried up the stairs to Rhonda's room, knocked once at the door, and slipped in.

"What is it?" Then she saw it was me. "You! What do you want?" she stammered. "How did you get in here?"

I leaned my back on the door, closing it behind me. "You know what I want. I want to know why."

Rhonda was still in her nightgown. Her fingers fluttered up to the buttons at her neck. "I don't have to talk to you," she said. "My mother will come in a minute. She'll kick you out."

"*Why*," I repeated.

Rhonda gave me a long look. "All right," she said. "If you're so dying to know." She walked to her dressing table, found her brush, and gave a careful stroke to her hair. "I guess you didn't like it much, being the stupid one. Having everybody think you copied from me. Quite a comedown for Little Miss Perfect."

"Rhonda, no one ever thought I was perfect."

"Oh no? I kind of thought you did, Nicole. At least, you wanted to be. Even if you had to do it by taking things away from other people."

Rhonda turned her back to me and gave a hard tug at her hair. "You know, when we first started out at the beginning of the year, you were kind of a nice kid. When you came to my house, and when we went to the mall. It was okay, at the beginning. I mean, you didn't know anything about clothes or makeup or boys, but you were kind of sweet. Huh. That didn't last." She looked at me over her shoulder. "You caught on real quick," she said. "Next thing I knew, you were the expert. Little Miss Romance."

"Me?" I stared at her. "Rhonda—I never knew that stuff. You were always the one. I had to ask you . . ."

"Oh yeah. Very humble. Very—" She almost spluttered, trying to find the words. "You are just the

biggest phony, Nicole. The biggest phony I have ever known."

I slumped against the door. Miss Romance? Phony? Is that how it seemed to her? "Rhonda," I mumbled "I am sorry about that, really. I know it seems like I was tricking you, and lying, keeping it a secret all that time. But that wasn't why I did it. I was just too shy to tell you about Andrew. I was embarrassed."

"Oh, that." She snorted. "I wasn't talking about your dumb boyfriend. Why, that much was obvious just from the way you were mooning around. I would have guessed about him even without reading your stupid letters." She swiveled around to face me, tossing her head so her hair fell down in back.

Well, of course I knew Rhonda had read the letters—who hadn't? But I hadn't realized, somehow, that she'd known about Andrew and me from the very start. I wriggled uncomfortably. "Rhonda, do you mean you knew right from the beginning?"

"Don't be an idiot, Nicole. Of course I knew. You practically tucked them into your homework—how could I have missed them? Oh yeah, I read those letters—every gluppy word. It almost made me throw up. But what was even worse was the way you acted. 'What should I wear, Rhonda?' 'Rhonda, what should I do?' Always running to me for help. You were the last person that needed my help, Nicole. But you didn't care. You just wanted to take it all . . . take everything away from me."

So she had known from the start. And for all those

months she had hated me. How much better she was at hiding things! Then it was no accident that she had used the letters to embarrass me. She had planned it all out—not just for revenge, but to wreck Andrew and me. I could hardly believe it, but it had to be the truth. Rhonda Winkler had been jealous of *me.*

"But, Rhonda." I turned to her. "Rhonda, what I had with Andrew—that wasn't taking anything from you. It had nothing to do with you . . ."

"It wasn't only the thing with Andrew." Rhonda flushed, and her eyes sparked. "No, it wasn't only that you had a boyfriend, a boyfriend from *Hollywood*, for Pete's sake, who I helped you get by teaching you everything you knew about makeup and clothes. No, it was more than that. It was your having to be the best in everything. Always getting the best marks in the class, without studying. While I was killing myself to get C's. Always flirting and buttering up your darling Mr. Nathan. But even with all that I could have stood it, if only you hadn't decided to take my part in the play. *My part;* the one you disqualified me for. And you were never even interested in acting, until the day beforehand, practically. You didn't *deserve* that part, Nicole. I did. I'm the one who wants to be an actress—that part was coming to me. But I could see you were going to walk in and take that, too. The same as you'd taken everything else."

I could hear Mrs. Winkler's footsteps hurrying up the stairs. I leaned back hard, and the door shook against me as she rapped it with her knuckles.

"Nicole? Are you in there, Nicole? I want you out *right* now. Your mother is on the way."

How could I make Rhonda understand? It wasn't like she said, it wasn't. I hadn't taken anything away—I had done it for her. I'd tried out for the play because I wanted us to be together. It wasn't my fault she had to quit. And the only reason I continued afterward was for her. So she could still participate, sort of, through me. We helped each other, just like the time with the report cards. I hadn't done it to be selfish, I hadn't.

But then, suddenly, the memory of the play came back to me. The bustle and excitement—the color and costumes and noise. I shut my eyes and imagined myself on the stage and under the lights, dressed in Sarah's starchy blue uniform, my voice ringing out clear and high as hundreds of people watched. And I had to admit it felt wonderful. I would have loved to be the star. Rhonda was right, I hadn't done it for her sake. I hadn't even thought how she would feel.

I looked up at her. She was crying, and her long hair fell forward, hiding her face.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I didn't know. I didn't think—"

"Yeah. Well, you never do. You never think of anyone but yourself. Isn't that right, Miss Perfect?"

Mrs. Winkler pounded on the door. "Rhonda, what's going on in there? Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, Mother. Nicole's coming out. She'll be there in a minute."

"Well, she'd better be." But then the door gave a little—she had stepped back. "Rhonda, I'm going downstairs. But I'm telling you, if Nicole's not out of there in five minutes, I'm going to force your door and drag her out."

Rhonda dried her face on her sleeve. "So now you know," she said. She slumped into the little chair by the vanity, and her reflection with its puffy lips and red nose gazed up at me. She looked awful. And I thought, This is all your fault, Nicole. You did this to her.

But then I caught a glimpse of another face in the mirror. Thin and pale—almost lost in the background—but hopeful. Rhonda's faithful shadow. Me. And at the sight of my eagerness, my stomach turned. And the shadow came to life.

"No!" I said out loud. "No! It's not the same. It's not the same at all!"

How many weeks had I been miserable and sick? Too sick to smile or eat or do my work in school? Rhonda had sacrificed me to her own jealousy. Maybe it was true that I hadn't been the best friend in the world. Maybe I hadn't always thought of how she felt, hadn't put myself in her place. But I had never *tried* to hurt her. I had never set out to cause her pain. And that was the difference between us.

I stepped to one side, holding myself tall and erect. My voice sounded steady and clear.

"You never understood. You never knew what it was about. All along you thought I was lying when I

said I cared about you. You thought I only wanted you for a friend so I could use you, to learn about makeup and things like that. But you were wrong, Rhonda. I wanted you for my friend because I loved you."

"Huh." Her fingers fussed with the jars and bottles on her table.

"Yes—I loved you. And I proved it. Why do you suppose I kept quiet in Mr. Taylor's office? I could have told them the truth."

"They wouldn't have believed you." Her voice was scratchy and dry.

"They might have. But I didn't even try to defend myself." I swallowed. "And the reason was that you were my friend and I'd promised not to hurt you. Now, maybe I did hurt you, Rhonda—by accident, or by just being me. But I never *tried* to hurt you. That's what being a friend is all about." For an instant her eyes flickered toward me, and I shook my head. "Don't worry, I'm not going to tell—I won't go back on it now. But"—and I drew myself up so I towered over her—"you're not my friend anymore, Rhonda. No—I mean I'm not *your* friend now. That's right. Because you were never a friend to me."

I turned and hurried down the stairs to the front door. My mother was just pulling up in the car.

"Nicole! What were you doing here?"

Mrs. Winkler rushed to the doorway. "I'll tell you what she was doing! She was harassing my daughter! She waltzes in here uninvited, marches up to her room,

and screams at her. Rhonda's all upset. You've got a fine specimen there, Mrs. Aldrich, with that girl. For her it wasn't enough to steal and lie—no, she has to come here on top of that and harangue my child, and torment her . . ."

"I agree Nicole shouldn't have come," my mother said quietly as she got out of the car. Then she raised her voice. "But you can be sure she had her reasons. And if you knew half as much about your daughter as—"

"Mom . . ." I ran up to her and held her arm. "Please, let's go." She circled her arm around me. Mrs. Winkler stepped outside, slamming the door of her house.

"Well, do you know what I think? I think the two of you are made from the same lousy mold—like mother, like daughter. Both of you, rude and selfish and dishonest! And I want you off my property!"

"Mom! Please . . ." I yanked harder. "Let's go. It's all over now."

My mother took a deep breath. Then she pulled me close and squeezed my shoulders tight. She faced Mrs. Winkler. "Nicki is a good girl," she said. "I know that. And I think you know it, too, or you wouldn't need to hate her so much." Then, with her arm still around me, she turned us away, toward home.

20

About a month later, on a beautiful day in June, I was sitting on the front steps reading when a car I didn't recognize pulled into our driveway.

"Hello, Nicki!" a voice called from inside. And three smiling, tanned people hopped out.

I shouldn't have been surprised. My mother had told me the Dennises were coming. They had found a house to live in, about a half hour from us, and they were going to move in as soon as Andrew finished school. But I'd had so much to think about lately that the news had slipped my mind. Besides, everything was over between Andrew and me.

Why hadn't I paid attention to my mom, I thought, as they slammed their car doors and waved. Why hadn't I listened? I could have prepared myself. I could have gone in my room to hide.

Mrs. Dennis came over first. She gave me a big hug and stepped back for a better look.

"Why, Nicki—you're looking great!" she said.

"You've got some color in your cheeks, and that outfit is adorable."

"Thanks."

"Hello, honey," said Mr. Dennis, bending over and giving me a peck on the cheek. "Good to see you. Where's your mom? Inside?"

I nodded. "My dad, too. They're finishing lunch." He ruffled my hair, and he and Mrs. Dennis went to ring the bell. I heard my mother's whoop as she opened the door. Then they hurried inside, laughing.

That left Andrew and me together. He was still leaning against the car, looking at his feet. Finally he raised his head and one finger and said, "Hi."

More than anything I wanted to turn and run like a rabbit. But something held me back. "Hi," I mumbled. "Don't you want to go in with your parents?"

"No."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

"I don't know. I guess I'll wait out here."

I set my book on the front steps and shuffled toward him.

"Do you want to take a walk around the block?" He shrugged. But then he pushed himself off the car and we set out.

For a few minutes we couldn't find anything to say. Andrew walked at the opposite edge of the sidewalk, as far from me as he could, with his eyes glued to the pavement. I looked down a lot, too—I practically memorized my pink sandals and white shorts. Every once in a while I sneaked a glance at his face. He had

on those same black glasses as before, and his hair kept falling in his eyes. He was so ordinary-looking! It didn't seem possible that everything that had happened to me that spring had started on account of him.

"I'm sorry I didn't answer your letters," I blurted out suddenly. "A lot of things came up."

"Yeah. I heard."

He *heard*? All the gory details? He *knew*? I stopped walking. "How . . . who . . ."

"My mother told me. Your mother told my mother, and my mother told me."

"She—she—how could she? She had no right."

"Why not?" He turned and looked at me. "How do you suppose I felt when you just stopped writing like that? One minute I thought you really liked me. And the next thing . . ." He gave his glasses a shove. "Didn't you think how I'd feel?"

"No," I whispered. Then I realized that was the exact same thing Rhonda had said to me. I groaned out loud. "Oh, Andrew, I've messed up everything!"

We started walking again. "You'll probably never forgive me," I said.

He shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. I guess it wasn't the worst thing in my life."

Well—that was the difference right there. Because it was—had been—the worst thing in mine. Those letters. When I had seen them in that box on stage, and heard kids reading them in the auditorium— I tried to remember, for a second, how awful it had felt. I even said it out loud.

"Well, you know, it *was* the worst thing that ever happened to me. It was terrible, everyone poking their noses in my personal business . . ."

But even as I said the words, I knew they were a lie. I couldn't bring the feeling back anymore. Maybe because of what had happened afterward, with Rhonda—when I found out that she had been the one who double-crossed me. My best friend, the person I cared about most in the world, had stabbed me in the back. Now, *that* was something to cry about. But having people see my letters, and find out that I loved my boyfriend and that he loved me? Sure, it was embarrassing, but—so what? It had been more embarrassing getting suspended and having the school think I was a cheat. But I hadn't lost sleep over that.

We reached the corner, and we were just about to turn onto the side street when I heard a bell jingle and the Good Humor truck pulled into view. All at once it felt very warm in the sun.

"How would you feel about some ice cream?" I said, scuffing the toe of my sandal along the sidewalk. "My treat."

"Okay, I guess." And for the first time he looked me in the eye.

"Hey!" I yelled to the truck driver. "Hey! Over here!"

I had just enough money to buy each of us a pop. We walked along, two, three blocks from my house, not saying anything, just licking. When we were both finished, we sat down on a neighbor's lawn and stretched our legs.

"Andrew," I said, "I'm a dope."

He started to laugh. We both laughed, rolling on our backs in the soft grass. Andrew pulled off his glasses and wiped the tears from his eyes. Then he turned on his side to face me, and tugged at a curl of my hair and tickled my neck.

"I know," he said. "But I like you anyway."

This is Elizabeth Feuer's first novel. Dr. Feuer lives in Colts Neck, New Jersey, with her family.

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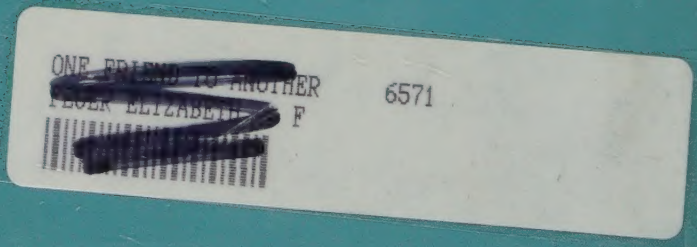
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